

## Opera Reviews and Interviews

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### San Diego Opera Celebrates 50th Anniversary with “La bohème”

Posted on January 25, 2015 by David



Soprano Alyson Cambridge is Mimi in San Diego Opera’s LA BOHEME (January/February, 2015). Photo by Ken Howard.

*About the photo above: Ken Howard’s “film noir” shot of Mimì in Act Three. The singer is Alyson Cambridge. I thought the whole production evoked, if not film noir, at least*

*the black & white movies of the early 20th century. In fact, Parpignol looked exactly like Charlie Chaplin and the entire mise en scène was somber and understated. DG*

**Review by David Gregson, Sunday, January 25**

**A wonderful *verismo* production designed and directed by Isabella Bywater and fine ensemble work highlight SDO's 50th season opener.**

The agony and the ecstasy that led to the San Diego Opera's 50th anniversary season has been thoroughly documented in the media, so it does not bear repeating here. Considering everything this company has been through to bring itself to the present moment, last night's opening of Puccini's *La bohème* could be considered a triumph, even if everything was not quite as wonderful as a seasoned opera lover might wish.

A perennial favorite anywhere in the world, *La bohème* is, among other things, a local tradition that almost didn't come off this year. When they were both spanking new, the SDO and San Diego Civic Theatre witnessed this opera staged in 1965 and the opera has been revived in various different production guises every five years since then. So this is the 11th time here for many of the faithful, including this writer. I have been attending the SDO since its inception.

The current show is wonderfully conceived. According to Nicolas Reveles, SDO's director of education and community outreach, the sets and costumes are the inspiration of Jonathan Miller who created this 1930s production concept for the English National Opera back in 2009. "His [Miller's] charge to the designer, Isabella Bywater, was the '30s photos of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Brassai and André Kertész of scenes in Paris," Reveles told me in a Facebook post. To me the imagery was evocative of early 20th-century black & white cinema. In fact, some young women sitting behind me last night could be heard complaining that they had hoped to see a colorful spectacle during this, their first outing at the opera. Even the famous Act Two setting of the Café Momus in the Latin Quarter was muted. And yet there were splashes of color and plenty of action and excitement. The famous toy vendor, Parpignol, did a spot-on impression of Charlie Chaplin, Mimì sported her pink beret, Musetta displayed shapely *jambes* that tapered to bright red shoes, and, of course, the entire scene culminated one of Puccini's greatest "curtain" inspirations — a rousing military tattoo.



Soprano Sara Gartland is Musetta in San Diego Opera's LA BOHEME (January/February, 2015). Photo by Ken Howard.

It would be wonderful to report that this *Bohème* boasts two glorious singers in the central roles of Mimì and Rodolfo, the doomed consumptive seamstress and her poet lover. Sadly, no. Lovely to look at, but less so to hear, our Mimì' (soprano Alyson Cambridge) projected a bold, often rough sound that tended to spread in many of Puccini's achingly lovely high-lying passages, and our handsome Rodolfo (Harold Meers) could never achieve the power or graceful legato some of the grand arching phrases require. His voice seems too small for these tasks. Had he pushed his voice more, perhaps he would have come to grief. The singers (and one must recall this was opening night and the space between the orchestra and stage was vast when the characters were in their rooftop garret) were sometimes out of sync with the orchestra — and I have no idea whom to blame for that. Conductor Karen Keltner, whose reading of the score was not ideally expansive or propulsive on opening night, may have found communication difficult with the distant singers.

But, even without a great pair of lovers, Puccini's score is a marvel that challenges and rewards both performers and listeners in the ensemble department. So much goes on at once, and so often! The garret scenes with the men — Rodolfo, the painter Marcello (baritone Morgan Smith), the musician Schaunard (baritone Malcolm MacKenzie), and the philosopher Colline (bass baritone Christian Van Horn) — were generally pretty marvelous. For his own part, Smith made an interesting and complex Marcello, singing beautifully while exploring the dimensionality of the character. And Van Horn had a genuinely touching moment of solo glory in singing farewell to his old coat. As a group, the Bohemians must be charming, funny and pathetic all at the same time. It was a well fulfilled assignment. And I must not forget to appreciate the comically beleaguered landlord, Benoit, well incarnated by bass-baritone, Scott Sikon.



(L-R) Baritone Malcolm MacKenzie is Schaunard, bass-baritone Christian Van Horn is Colline, tenor Harold Meers is Rodolfo, bass Scott Sikon is Benoit and baritone Morgan

Smith in Marcello in San Diego Opera's LA BOHEME (January/February 2015). Photo by Ken Howard, 2015.

Act Two (The Christmas Eve street and café scene) has the most music and action going on at once — so those in the audience slavishly glued to the supertitles are bound to get confused. It's actually hard to sort it all out. Who's saying this, who's doing that? By the time Musetta sings her famous "waltz," one just gives up and goes with the flow. I found soprano Sara Gartland to be an especially endearing Musetta. By the end I cared about her almost as much as I did about Mimì. It was an especially well-sung and affecting portrayal with a clear arc to it.

Needless to say, any opera goer who has lived as long as I have has seen *La bohème* the proverbial "a million times," and simply does not look forward to hearing it yet again; but every time I hear it live in a theater, I am blown away by the brilliance of its composition. It's really a perfect little opera. And the text, despite some scattered banalities, still has the power to engage.

As San Diegans, we have been spoiled here for years by our fine opera chorus, and with the San Diego Symphony musicians in the pit, we are able to enjoy a high degree of polish and sophistication from the orchestral players. **The pleasure of the evening was increased by a well-lighted (thank you Thomas C. Hase), lovely production design, and a naturalistic directorial approach (thank you Isabella Bywater) that is about as far from Regietheater as it can get.** The updating of the opera to the 1930s does not hurt it one iota, and Puccini's music fits the staging at every moment, a feature missing from most experimental productions in which stage action and the music that goes with it have nothing to do with one another. I was impressed at the menacing chord heard from the pit, exactly timed with the fall of Mimì's arm as she dies. You'd never see this in anything staged by Robert Wilson! Never, ever! His ideal is flawlessly beautiful stage pictures at the expense of the composer's intentions.

Well done SDO. Let's hope for a bright future.

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*Please feel free to post comments below.*

ALL PERFORMANCES AT SAN DIEGO CIVIC THEATRE

Saturday: Jan 24 at 7 p.m.

Tuesday: Jan 2 at 7 p.m.

Thursday: Jan 29 at 7 p.m.

Sunday: Feb 1 at 2 p.m.

\*All Friday Subscribers will attend the Thursday, January 29 performance.

**THE CAST**

Rodolfo: Harold Meers

Mimi: Alyson Cambridge

Musetta: Sara Gartland

Marcello: Morgan Smith

Colline: Christian Van Horn

Schaunard: Malcolm MacKenzie



Mimi and Rodolfo, with Musetta at top of stairs. Photo by Ken Howard.

Benoit/Alcindoro: Scott Sikon

Vendor: Chad Frisque

Parpignol: Enrique Toral

Customs Guard: Bermudez  
Sergeant: Christopher James Stephens

**PRODUCTION**

Conductor: Karen Keltner  
Stage director: Isabella Bywater  
Set and costume designer: Isabella Bywater  
Lighting designer: Thomas C.Hase  
Wig and make-up designer: Steven W. Bryant  
Chorus Master: Charles Prestinari  
Supertitles: Ian C. Campbell / Charles Arthur  
Diction coach: Emanuela Patroncini

[The Program in a PDF file](#)

[San Diego Opera](#)



Soprano Alyson Cambridge is Mimi and tenor Harold Meers is Rodolfo in San Diego Opera's LA BOHEME (January/February, 2015). Photo by Ken Howard.