

# OPERA-WITHIN-AN-OPERANOVELTY And Within, a Captivating "Le Rossignol"

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SANTA FE, NM---A brilliant production of Stravinsky's "Le Rossignol" capped an ingenious double bill at the Santa Fe Opera, with visuals suggesting its premiere a century ago under Diaghilev. However much nostalgia was invested, the piece still suggested a very modern stylized tone, as if all woven into a fantasy-dream far from reality.

The original production was already a hybrid form, a mix of opera, dance, visual art, and vivid theatrical touches. Its origins are equally unorthodox: A Far-Eastern fairy tale with a Russian cast playing before French audiences, all sung emphatically in Russian. In it an emperor is mesmerized by the irresistible song of a nightingale. When the latter flies off, the emperor is near collapse, with a mechanical nightingale built to take the place of the original. Touched by his show of affection, the real nightingale returns and the two are reconciled compatibly.

The beauty of this Michael Gieleta production lay in the combination of enchantment, dream-world, fantasy, and nostalgic recreation of the premiere's technology---all blended into a complex double-bill format further discussed below..

Thrust into this the restless music of Stravinsky, often sounding like the quieter portions of "Firebird," and some abstract art designs by Andreij Goulding suggesting Joan Miró traced out before your eyes by invisible hands, and the fantasy is complete. The last act is mind-boggling as the nightingale appears magically on high singing her famous songs, then coming down to pair with the emperor and swear her fidelity.

The nightingale showed the seamless soprano---largely above the staff----of the lyric coloratura Erin Morley (one to remember!), offset by the powerful baritone Anthony Michaels-Moore as the emperor---two of the best castings I encountered in my whole Santa Fe week. Total enchantment!

The work begins and ends with the Fisherman singing a narration while "paddling" a piano-turned-boat across the stage, one of several cross-references linking the pieces of the double bill ingeniously.

Yes, paddling a piano. I mean, why just have a dull narration when you can create a play-within-a-play? Gieleta's brainstorm was to use Mozart's farcical "The Impresario" as the framing agent, its madcap performers slipping on costumes and presenting "Le Rossignol" as their let's-do-a-show, with the piano of "Impresario" converting into the Fisherman's boat, paddled across the stage, with dancers providing the propulsion. The Mozart is a silly trifle about vain divas one-upping one another during a casting scene, very freely adapted, empowered by one of Santa Fe's favorite coloraturas, Brenda Rae, opposite Morley. If you were thoroughly confused by the linguistic mishmash-----the Mozart in Italian and English, the Stravinsky in Russian like the Parisian original----the English translations led you out of the *bouillabaisse*.

The bill was securely led by Kenneth Montgomery. All in all, this was one of the most innovative evenings ever in Santa Fe Opera's 58 seasons.

Next summer's slate here: "Rigoletto," "The Daughter of the Regiment," "Salome," Mozart's "La

finta giardiniera" and the world premiere of Jennifer Higdon's Civil-War opera "Cold Mountain."

Stravinsky-Mozart double bill at the Santa Fe Opera, through Aug. 15. Two and a half hours, one intermission. For info: (800) 280-4654 or go [online](#).

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Paul Hertelendy has been covering the dance and modern-music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area with relish -- and a certain amount of salsa -- for years.

These critiques appearing weekly (or sometimes semi-weekly, but never weakly) will focus on dance and new musical creativity in performance, with forays into books (by authors of the region), theater and recordings by local artists as well.

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