



BWW Reviews: Puccini's LA RONDINE is a Winner at Opera Theatre of St. Louis

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by Steve Callahan

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Giacomo Puccini is the unrivaled master of romantic melody. His all too rarely seen opera, "La rondine", has opened in a beautiful production at the Opera Theatre of St. Louis. I've been waiting for this for years, my heart having been captured early by one lilting, gently syncopated romantic waltz refrain that recurs again and again like the memory of a distant sweet infatuation. It is the very essence of Puccini.

The plot has hints of Verdi's opera, "La traviata." Both works show a beautiful Parisian courtesan fleeing her glittering demi-monde to find a life of simple true love. Each lady becomes persuaded that revelation of her scandalous past would be devastating to her lover's respectable family. In "Traviata" Violetta ("la dame aux camélias") ultimately dies, while in "Rondine" Magda, like a swallow, returns whence she had come - to the life of the kept woman of a wealthy banker. Which of the two endings, I wonder, is sadder?

Corinne Winters gives us a physically and musically beautiful Magda. In her lower range her powerful voice is rich and luscious. The highest notes are true, but they are at the very edge of her tessitura - her vocal "sweet spot" - and they are not quite effortless. As the evening went on they seemed easier and easier. Her vowels have a warm, dark shade which is musically lovely, but from time to time it poses a small problem in our understanding of the lyric (which, as in all OTSL productions, is in English). I think I might term Ms. Winters a lyrico-spinto soprano, for her voice has that wonderful quality of cutting cleanly through orchestra, chorus and all, so that whenever she sings it is she whom we hear.

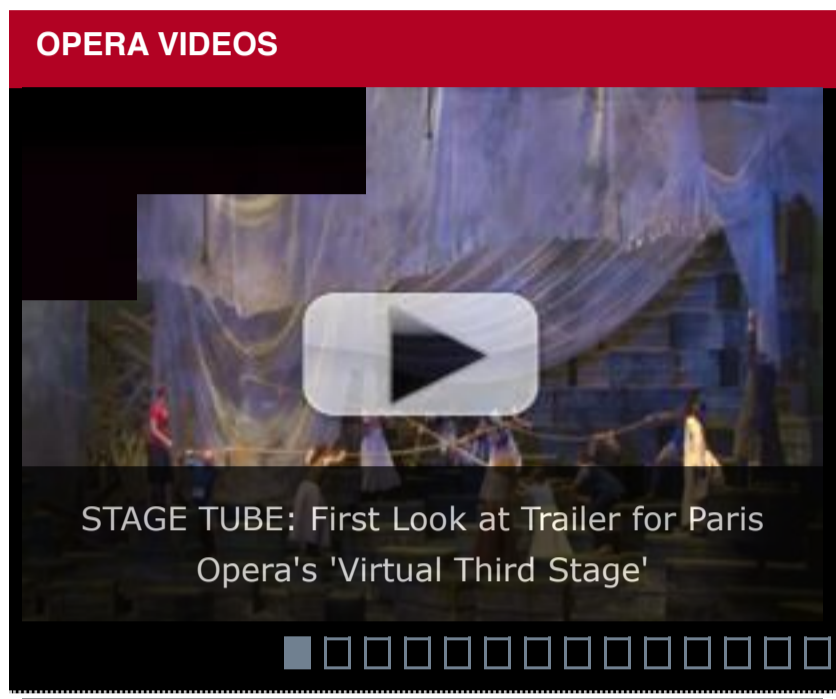
Ruggero, Magda's lover, is sung by Anthony Kalil. He is indeed a talent to be watched. His voice is strong, true and easy. It is unchanging in timbre from the lowest notes to the very top of his range. His diction is flawless. When Ruggero sings one never, never has to look at the supertitles.

Magda's maid, Lisette, is a delightful role. Sydney Mancasola sings Lisette, and she nearly stole the show for me. Her performance is strong, bright and sassy - filled with enormous confidence. Her voice is sweet and clear and her diction superb. In the end Lisette, whose theatre career was a one-night catastrophe, also becomes a swallow, returning to her home as Magda's servant.

Prunier is a poet, and his romance with Lisette is a comic spatful counterpart of that between Magda and Ruggero. He naggingly instructs Lisette in how to behave, how to dress, how to use make-up, how to present herself - as his lady, and as a performer on the stage. John McVeigh sings Prunier. His voice is not terribly powerful, but it is a fine one, and he delivers that celestially high note with such grace and beauty. His comic sense is perfect for the role.

Baritone Matthew Burns sings beautifully as Rambaldo, Magda's banker lover.

The entire cast are excellent. And, by the way, all of them - save Mr. Kalil - are past or current members of Opera Theatre's Gerdine Young Artist program. This is a remarkable testimony to the success of this training program.



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A native Kansan I have a BA (Math and Theatre) and MA (Theatre). I was working on a PhD in Theatre when IBM sniffed my math background and lured me away with money enough to feed my (then two) children. Nevertheless I've been active in theatre all my life--having directed fifty-three productions (everything from opera in Poughkeepsie to Mrozek in Woodstock to musical melodrama in Germany) and I've acted in seventy others. Now that I'm retired I don't have that eight-to-five distraction and can focus a bit more. I've regularly reviewed theatre in St. Louis for KDHX since 1991 and am tickled now to also join BWW.

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