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## SFO's double bill features dueling divas, top-flight nightingale



Dancer Xiaoxiao Wang and the chorus in *Le rossignol*. Courtesy Ken Howard/The Santa Fe Opera

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By James M. Keller  
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The idea of pairing Mozart's *The Impresario* with Stravinsky's *Le rossignol* might seem the strangest of conceits, but in a new production by director Michael Gieleta, unveiled Saturday night at The Santa Fe Opera, the two pieces coalesce into a smart, inventively synchronized entity that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Both works are problem pieces. *The Impresario* (*Der Schauspieldirektor*, as Mozart titled it),

was a divertissement penned for a Viennese court entertainment in 1786, a silly little throwaway about a beleaguered opera impresario trying to survive the temperamental rivalries of his leading singers — most vehemently his sopranos. Its score comprises only an orchestral overture, two arias and two vocal ensembles, which originally were eked out by interpolated play-acting on topics that were popular and resonant at the time. Admirable though Mozart's contribution is, it is insufficient in quantity and dramatic balance to yield a satisfying stage work on its own.

*Le rossignol* also has issues. Composed over nearly six years, from 1908 through 1914, it spanned a period during which Stravinsky's musical language evolved considerably. The resulting piece, which Stravinsky described as "a kind of opera-pageant ballet," is Janus-like, the first of its three continuous acts looking back toward the glittering nationalism of Rimsky-Korsakov (Stravinsky's teacher) and the later parts leaping into the brave new world of modernism. This split personality is less disconcerting for us, at a remove of a century, than it was for music lovers in 1914, when the piece was premiered by Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. The more challenging problem with *Le rossignol* is that, like *The Impresario*, it is too short. Based on a Hans Christian Andersen tale, it involves a nightingale in China long ago whose song charms all who hear it, including the emperor. When the emperor accepts a mechanical bird as a gift, the nightingale is offended and flies away, incurring the emperor's wrath; but when the emperor faces death, the nightingale returns to charm away the grim reaper with an irresistible song. All of this is compressed into a 45-minute span that is rich in musical beauty but remains emotionally cool, never conveying much about the personalities of the characters.

Gieleta solves the problem of *The Impresario*'s length by expanding it with seven extra Mozart items, ranging from a short canon to full-blown concert arias. These, plus the original material, are fitted with English words by Ranjit Bolt that, along with extended spoken texts, follow the original work's basic contours but mold it into a more detailed backstage farce in which temperamental opera stars vie to seize roles in a production by a failing opera company that is casting, of all things, *Le rossignol*. The resulting comedy is of a broad, vaudevillian sort. Already in the all-but-obligatory overture dumb show, divas crash in from adjoining studios (an errant Salome, a ruthless Tosca), and some of the names assigned to the characters are so overwrought as to instill fear that the whole thing will be merely an exercise in camp. Opera singers left to their own devices will almost never underact, and, although Gieleta obviously steers the stage action, one can imagine him encouraging some of his singers to do what comes naturally, which is to chew the scenery into a pulp. Amid the flailing arms, bouncing bosoms and accents akimbo, some genuinely funny stuff keeps the thing from descending into total dramatic bedlam; note especially Meredith Arwady as a matronly contralto you would not want to cross and soprano Erin Morley, whose calculating demeanor at the audition would have won her the role of the Nightingale even if her voice had not (but, boy, did it ever). This madcap rewrite of *The Impresario* ran perhaps 10 or 15 minutes too long, but Gieleta was intent on introducing everyone who would have a part in *Le rossignol*, which followed after intermission, so at least the additions served a rational purpose.

The zaniness leads to a closing tableau in which all the participants huddle around a score of *Le rossignol*. That tableau returns to open and close the second half of the evening. The stunning sets of Stravinsky's opera grow out of it and retreat back to it Transformer-like. Contextualizing *Le rossignol* in this way helps humanize it. At the back of our minds, we are not far from recalling that the opera's stylized characters are actual people — ridiculous ones, even — who are temporarily consecrated to creating wonder. James Macnamara's

sets (lit by Christopher Akerlind) in *Le rossignol* include projected images (by Andrzej Goulding) allusive to Picasso, Matisse, Calder, Miró and Tanguy. Fabio Toblini's fanciful costumes also underscore elements of overlap between the two pieces. In *Le rossignol*, the Nightingale is attired in a gown that, though appearing modestly gray (echoing the "all business" beige suit its character had worn at the audition), reveals folds of subtly colored splendor when she extends it while perched in a tree inspired by a Man Ray coat-hanger mobile. In *The Impresario*, the warring songbirds were also feathered creatures, their plumed hats serving as avian crests to their vanity. In both operas, a corps of six dancers — five men, one woman — enliven the activity; indeed, the gentlemen dancers in *Le rossignol* sometimes arrange the singers into stage pictures, serving as the director's surrogates. The stagecraft is enchanting throughout *Le rossignol*, with the focus moving quickly and seamlessly from one delight to another.

Conductor Kenneth Montgomery elicited the orchestra's most consistently polished playing so far this season. One wants to signal a number of the instrumentalists for solo praise, but, after beginning with flutist Bart Feller and cellist Joseph Johnson, one realizes that the list would grow too long to fit here. Of the singers, Morley gave a top-flight performance of international stature, her voice elegantly tracing the terrors of Mozart's high-flying coloratura (in the role *Impresario* traditionalists know as Mademoiselle Silberklang) and imbuing the Nightingale's appearances with nuanced delicacy and poignant tenderness. Lyric tenor Bruce Sledge, as the Fisherman, played a largely static part — basically, a listener — but his voice brought his role alive through its alluring sweetness and sensitive phrasing. Apart from her entertaining turn in *The Impresario* (where she rendered *Don Giovanni's* "Champagne" aria practically at its baritone pitch), Arwady's ominous tones portrayed Death, who sings to the Emperor through a cubist painting hanging above his bed. Elsewhere in the casts, soprano Brenda Rae flirted with over-the-top dramatic and vocal caricature in the Mozart but was an appealing Cook in the Stravinsky; baritone Anthony Michaels-Moore projected a somber presence as both the *Impresario* (modeled after Diaghilev) and the Emperor; bass Kevin Burdette popped out some patter (in *The Impresario*) that would impress even Gilbert and Sullivan aficionados; and bass-baritone David Govertsen gave a pleasing rendition of the interpolated Mozart aria "Ich möchte wohl der Kaiser sein," altered for present purposes from a militaristic rant to an ode to donating money for the arts. The dancers, choreographed by Seán Curran, all deserved warm applause: Anthony Bocconi, Jesse Campbell, Reed Luplau, Shane Rutkowski, Jonathan Royce Windham, and, as the exquisite mechanical nightingale, Xiaoxiao Wang.

Impressive imagination went into the conception and execution of this team enterprise, which is perhaps less a double bill than a new work that melds the Mozart and Stravinsky pieces into a finely crafted whole. Not the least of its achievements is how it reminds viewers that onstage wonder is often created by people who, offstage, may be fallible in the extreme.

*Santa Fe Opera's amalgam of Mozart's The Impresario (performed in English) and Stravinsky's Le rossignol (sung in Russian) continues at 8:30 p.m. Wednesday; and at 8 p.m. Aug. 1, 7 and 15. For ticket information, call 986-5900 or 800-280-4654, or visit [www.santafeopera.org](http://www.santafeopera.org).*

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