

Preview

Opera Per Tutti to stage two Puccini one-acts at Cleveland Public Theatre

by Mike Telin



Since the premiere of Puccini's *Il trittico* in 1918 at the Metropolitan Opera, the three one-act operas that comprise The Triptych have continued to be audience favorites. On Friday, April 19 at 7:30 and Sunday, April 21st at 3:00 pm, Cleveland Public Theatre's Opera Company in Residence, [Opera Per Tutti](#) (OPT) will complete The Triptych cycle with productions of *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi*.

"The time was right for us to take this on," OPT founder and executive director Andrea Anelli told us by telephone. "We had a successful production of *Il tabarro*, and we wanted to finish The Triptych as well as to stage productions that involved a larger cast, and part of my goal is to provide other opportunities for area artists. Then of course there is my personal love of Puccini."

[Suor Angelica](#) and [Gianni Schicchi](#) are co-productions with Cleveland Public Theatre (CPT) and Anelli says that being invited to become CPT's resident opera company has made it possible for her company to produce larger-scale works. "CPT's generosity, the use of the elegant Gordon Square Theatre along with box office and technical support as well as help with sets — it's just a great collaboration."

For these productions OPT continues their relationship with stage director Scott Skiba. "I love how he works," Anelli says. "He was so great when we got around the table with both casts and talked about the vision for all of the characters at great length which is so important in operas such as these where everything is relational." Anelli goes on to say "for example in *Suor*, we talked about how we want the audience to see the nuns as people, who have different personalities and just like in a family you need to learn to live together."

Anelli, who plays the title role in *Suor*, says the challenge of performing the character is finding the balance between her appearing as someone who is often pre-occupied and yet not making her unreachable. "I think she has had to make a day-to-day life for herself and I didn't want to play her as a tragic suicidal person the moment you lay eyes on her. I think Suor Angelica is a person who wants to make something useful of her life, but it is hard. So when there is no more hope that she somehow might get to see her son again, there is no longer a reason for her to fight."

Although Gianni Schicchi receives only a brief mention in Dante's *Inferno*, Schicchi is condemned to Hell for making the will of Buoso Donati highly favorable to Schicchi while impersonating the dead man. "The thing that I really love about the story is that it could take place at any time, anywhere," Anelli laughs. "It's basically about greed and what happens to people when they [become greedy] and almost no one is immune from that feeling. We all have a mercenary part of ourselves. We can watch them and say oh, those people are terrible but I don't know anyone who is faced with the same situation who might not feel that they too hope they get left something in the will. Of course they take it a little far."

Baritone Brian Keith Johnson will perform the role of the affectionate scoundrel, although *Gianni Schicchi* is the quintessential ensemble piece. "Vocally a lot is happening all of the time and all of the roles are quite challenging." Anelli says the cast has spent a lot of time working on the nuances in their relationships with one another. "Everyone needs to be an individual and not just a greedy mass of people."

But what would Puccini be without an orchestra? "I would love to have as many musicians in the orchestra as possible, but the orchestra is a big expense. Of course there is the piano option but I felt that I wanted to have more colors than we would have with just a piano." Conductor Anthony Addison saw a solution to the orchestra dilemma. "Anthony thought that if we used strings and percussion and synthesized the wind parts, that would be the best solution." And as the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention, which led to the creation of OPT's Innovative Orchestra [Kickstarter](#) campaign.

OPT's innovative orchestra for this production will mix live acoustic orchestral instruments with sampled and synthesized electronic sounds, in an exploration of a potential opera-orchestra model that is sustainable in the current economic climate, and which allows OPT to offer tickets at an affordable price — even free to those members of the community who otherwise could not afford to participate in the operatic experience.

Anelli clearly sees the innovative orchestra as an experiment. She has full confidence that Addison's orchestration will honor Puccini's musical colors. "He'll get the best effects possible from the available technology."

What is it about *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi* that keeps audiences coming back? Anelli thinks that is it the timelessness of the stories. "Despite the fact that [everyone on stage is singing] and stories take place in a different time, they are part of human nature. Whether it's a mother's love for her child or a person's greed for something they think is rightfully theirs. These are two things that are not hard to understand. So I think it makes it easy for the audience to enter those worlds and to feel something for the characters."

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