

Preview

Opera Circle to present *Le Villi*, Puccini's first opera, on October 18 & 20

by Mike Telin



Giacomo Puccini's first staged work, *Le Villi* (*The Wills* or *The Fairies*), with libretto by Ferdinando Fontana, received its premiere in Milan on May 31, 1884 in its original one-act version. The opera is based on Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr's short story, *Les Willis*, which in turn was based on the central European legend of the vila. On Friday, October 18 at 7:30 pm in Tucker Hall at St. Paul's Episcopal Church and Sunday, October 20 at 4 pm in the Polish-American Cultural Center, [Opera Circle](#) will present *Le Villi*. This weekend's performances will be Opera Circle's first production of any Puccini opera.

"I have a great respect for Puccini. I think he was a genius," says Opera Circle executive director and co-founder Dorota Sobieska (left). "But it is easy to take that genius on a superficial level and create a production that is very nostalgic. While that is acceptable, I think there is much more to him. To approach Puccini seriously you need a more in-depth look into the resources that are available in order to get a bigger perspective on him and his times."

Sobieska, who holds a doctoral degree in English from Kent State University (with an interdisciplinary dissertation on British Romantic poetry, music, and philosophy of art) says that Romanticism has always spoken to her. She sees the opera as an extended *Lied*. "It is written in what I [describe] as the greater romantic lyric that dominates the romantic era. I think of Puccini as a lyrical composer, but this opera is not only lyrical in terms of the musical line, but it's lyrical as a story. It reminds me of the greater romantic lyric pieces like Schubert's *Der Erlkönig*."

"Puccini was young when he wrote *Le Villi* and it has the freshness of a young composer," says Sobieska, who will sing the soprano role of Anna. Sobieska also points out that although the opera lasts only around an hour, it is vocally demanding. "He was a young composer and some of the things are much more difficult than in his later compositions." Tenor Matthew Miles, who will sing the role of Roberto, agrees. "My voice teacher said that it is harder than Pinkerton (*Madame Butterfly*). He must have had a crazy tenor in mind when he wrote it."



Sobieska finds the opera interesting because the [plot](#) is firmly rooted in romantic fantasy. Matthew Miles (left) describes the story as fast paced. “In the beginning Roberto and Anna are in love but he decides to leave and tells Anna not to worry — I will be back because I love you with all of my heart. Then her father blesses them and they share a beautiful prayer. So you have true love, devotion and passion. Then at the opposite end of the spectrum, Roberto comes back after having broken all of his vows and cheated on Anna. When he realizes that he has ruined everything

and Anna has died of despair, then he also dies of despair. So everything changes quickly. It’s like Puccini was trying to fit all aspects of human emotion into an hour-long opera.”

Originally, Puccini had intended for poems to be read between acts explaining the intervening action in the plot, although it is debatable whether or not narration was part of the opera's premiere. For these performances Opera Circle has chosen to include the readings, which will be read in Italian by Paolo Parodi with English supertitles. “I am an English major, so if there is a poem I’m not going to skip it,” Sobieska says, laughing. “I think including spoken voice enhances the levels of expression that are in it. We wanted someone who could do justice to the part and Paolo is Italian.” The production also includes ballet scenes.

Roberto is the first Puccini role Youngstown native Matthew Miles has sung, and he says he has enjoyed the experience of learning the part. “I was nervous that I might be getting into Puccini too early. But the role is actually really comfortable for me so I have been pleasantly surprised. When I first started working on it I thought, this has a lot B-flats, but I got it into my voice much easier than I had expected. I think in every tenor's career you have to get to a point where you say, OK, I can sing a B-flat on command and it’s going to be fine no matter what the circumstances. And I think you need to have an opera that challenges you to do so. Puccini also has a way of writing that a lot of the time is slow and tranquil-sounding, so you do not have to put so much intensity in the line to create the emotion.”

Although *Le Villi* may be Opera Circle's first Puccini opera, it most certainly will not be the last. “Yes, this is our first,” Sobieska says, “but we want our adventure with Puccini to be as important as our adventure with Bellini.”

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