

Review

**Opera Western Reserve: *La Bohème*
at Stambaugh Auditorium (November 15)**

by Robert Rollin



Last Friday night Opera Western Reserve presented Puccini's *La Bohème* in a beautiful Stambaugh Auditorium production, replete with excellent singing, fine dramatic pacing and superlative orchestral accompaniment. Music director Susan Davenny Wyner's effective conducting, and director/scenic designer David Vosbergh's attractive sets and lively staging contributed greatly. Now in its tenth year, the company continued to wisely schedule only one performance annually, ensuring houses bursting at the seams. The Friday performance was no different.

Soprano Marian Vogel, who sang the title role in OWR's 2011 production of *Tosca*, was terrific as the tragic seamstress Mimi. Tenor Alex Richardson, who sang Cavaradossi in the aforementioned production, returned as the intense poet Rodolfo, expertly tossing off the difficult role.

Soprano Lauren Frey, as Musetta, the sophisticated woman of the world, paired with baritone Michael Young, as Marcello, the painter. Both sang brilliantly, with Frey negotiating the intricacies of her *bel canto* role with sparkling ease, while Young enlivened the performance with his lovely vocal color.

Baritone Jason Budd, as the philosopher Colline, and baritone Joel Herold as Schaunard, the musician, rounded out the lead roles. Budd stood out for his comic acting abilities and fine dark tone.

Puccini's *Verismo* opera style focused on ordinary people. Containing a continuous sound tapestry of leitmotifs assigned to the important characters, it resembled Wagner, shimmering with engaging orchestral accompaniment.

Act I was set in Marcello's garret on Christmas Eve, and included entertaining interactions among the lead roles. The act's highlight occurred when Mimi, a neighbor who embroidered flowers, entered after everyone but Rodolfo had left, and the two protagonists fell deeply in love. Vogel and Frey sang gorgeous arias to one another.

Act II began with a street scene in front of the Café Momus in the early morning light. Happy crowds still milled about and the mixed choral treatment scintillated. Attention moved up to stage left and the friends' table, as Rodolfo introduced Mimi.

Marcello nearly choked on his first holiday toast when he saw Musetta, his lover, at an adjoining table with the rich old man, Alcindoro. Frey depicted Musetta beautifully in the famous aria, *Musetta's Waltz*, as she advertised her charms and Marcello inserted caustic remarks. Later the characters had wonderful melodic exchanges in a marvelous septet. The friends departed after Musetta feigned a foot injury and sent Alcindoro to fix her shoes, leaving everyone's bill for the old man.

Act III began with a February daybreak at the city tollgate. People waited on line to enter, allowing for a unique orchestral prelude present nowhere else in the opera. The woodwinds took the lead with charming harp and string accompaniment. Later there was a fine trumpet solo. The street cleaners shouted to be admitted. Day laborers and women with items to sell arrived. The separate women's and men's choruses sparkled.

Stage left found Musetta teaching singing and Marcello painting, living together in a small nearby inn. Mimi, arriving outside, told Marcello that Rodolfo had left her. When Rodolfo awoke, Marcello quickly sent Mimi home. Rodolfo told Marcello that he feared Mimi would die living in his cold apartment. Mimi returned unnoticed. Vogel, Richardson and Young sang a moving trio with the characters individually expressing their fears, much like asides in a Shakespearian play. Frey, as Musetta, returned from the local tavern, and the four sang *Addio dolce svegliare* with great beauty. The vocals and orchestral accompaniment were absolutely stunning.

Act IV returned to the garret. Young (Marcello) and Richardson (Rodolfo) sang a sad and stirring duo mourning the loss of their loves. The arrival of Colline and Schaunard with food and wine provided brief comic relief with the two dancing a mock quadrille and joining in fake swordplay, but Musetta came and announced in whispers that Mimi was dying.

Mimi arrived and was made comfortable. Vogel (Mimi) sang a beautiful theme from Act II asking for a muff to warm her hands. Alone, the two lovers sang of their undying affection. Many themes from Act I returned. The others came back and discovered that Mimi had passed, and Rodolfo threw himself on her body in despair. The performance moved smoothly and was emotionally powerful, as cast, orchestra, and conductor quickly and effectively closed the opera. The recurring motivic treatment from Act I helped to frame the story.

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