

*The Girl of the Golden West:*  
A conversation with tenor Limmie Pulliam

by Mike Telin



Perhaps no seven-year period in history epitomizes the American dream more than that of the California Gold Rush. Between 1848 and 1855 approximately 300,000 people made their way west in search of the fortunes that were there for the taking in the California goldfields.

Giacomo Puccini immortalized that period of U.S. history in his three-act opera, *La Fanciulla del West*. Based on the play *The Girl of the Golden West* by the American author David Belasco, the opera centers

around Minnie, the owner of the Polka saloon, her love interest, the bandit Dick Johnson, and the jealous suitor, sheriff Jack Rance.

On Sunday, May 14 at 3:00 pm at Severance Music Center, Franz Welser-Möst will lead the first of three performances of Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West*. Sung in Italian with English subtitles, the cast features soprano Emily Magee as Minnie, bass Roman Burdenko as Jack, and tenor Limmie Pulliam as Dick, along with a horde of gold miners. Performances continue at 7:30 pm on Wednesday May 17 and Saturday May 20. Tickets are available [online](#). The opera is presented as part of The Orchestra's *American Dream Festival*.

I caught up with Limmie Pulliam by phone and began our conversation by asking him who Dick Johnson is.

Limmie Pulliam: He's a notorious bandit who has built quite a name for himself robbing saloons. And unbeknown to us when the opera opens, he and Minnie have encountered each other in the past while traveling to Monterey. And when he stumbles into the Polka

Saloon his intentions are to rob it, but when he sees Minnie he has a change of heart. Suddenly he has his mind set on a different treasure, which is Minnie.

*Mike Telin: What attracts Dick to Minnie? She is fierce but also vulnerable.*

LP: I think that is what attracts him to her. She's not afraid of him. She's a strong, independent woman who is capable of caring for herself — which he realizes by the way she handles the men in the Polka Saloon. So I think it's her strong nature and her no-nonsense approach to life. She doesn't put up with anything from the other gentlemen or from the constant advances from the sheriff, Jack Rance — who also fancies her. She's secure in her own skin and knows who she is.

*MT: The opera has a huge cast.*

LP: It does. There are only two female roles but a lot of guys.

*MT: Musically the opera is great.*

LP: It is. There are so many little earworm melodies that the audience will recognize from other Puccini operas. And it has that Puccini rhythm to it and these long legato lines that seem to go on forever. Especially during the big duet with Minnie and Dick Johnson.

It's nice for me because the tenor often has to do the heavy lifting, But it's Minnie who has the heavy lifting in this piece. So it is nice to sing such a great role without the pressure of having to do that.

*MT: The opera is not performed all that frequently.*

LP: One reason is that Minnie is an extremely difficult role to cast. So it is one of those opera gems that is not performed all that often simply for that reason.

Puccini has his famous operas like *Tosca*, *La bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, but *Fanciulla* is the one that he called his greatest opera. And once you delve into it you get a sense of why he would say that.

*MT: What do you like about it?*

LP: There are so many things. The sweeping vocal lines are just a joy to sing. I have two great arias with “Quello che tacete” and “Ch'ella mi creda” and that extraordinary duet with Minnie. There's so much great music to sing in every scene, it is really hard to pick

a favorite section. It's just a joy, because very few composers write for the voice like Puccini. Many try to imitate that, but it's not something that is easily duplicated.

It's also well constructed throughout and is all wrapped up neatly in a very short third act where Dick Johnson is captured and about to be hanged and in comes Minnie to save the day. She claims her man and off they go into the sunset.

*MT: How does this opera fit into the concept of *The American Dream*?*

LP: If you think of it being set during the California Gold Rush, the people who headed west in search of gold were in search of the American Dream — the freedom to have riches. And to me, that's how it fits in.

*MT: Is there anything you'd like to add?*

LP: I'm looking forward to a fun week of rehearsals and some wonderful performances for the Cleveland audiences. If you have never been to an opera and are curious, this is a great first opera. And I'm looking forward to working with Franz and the orchestra. I made my debut with him last season with *Otello* and now *Fanciulla* is a great way to return.

Click [here](#) to view all *The American Dream Festival* events.

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