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Review: Festival Opera triumphs with challenging 'Turandot'

By Sue Gilmore
Contra Costa Times

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"Turandot," Puccini's final gift to the opera world, is not an easy production to mount with the biggest of budgets and under the best of circumstances. So it is all the more heartening to report that the first-ever stab that small but big-hearted Festival Opera is taking at it in Walnut Creek is, if not an outright triumph on all counts, a thoroughly credible, even memorable effort.

Buoyed by superb singing from three of its four principals, deft staging from director David Cox and the supple and sensitive orchestral contributions marshaled by conductor Bryan Nies, Saturday's opening-night performance at the Leshner Center for the Arts offered rich rewards in each of its three well-balanced acts.

Adding immensely to the visual appeal and the verisimilitude were designer Peter Crompton's stunning vermilion-and-violet-hued sets embellished with gold, which effectively transformed the Hofmann Theatre stage into an imperial palace in ancient Peking. As lavish and detailed as many sets seen in much larger opera houses, they filled every square inch of the stage and were further enhanced by some creative lighting choices.

In the role of the haughty and cold-blooded title princess, Canadian soprano Othalie Graham, who

has sung many a "Turandot" before, impressed with her commanding volume if not her musicality. This is a woman with enough vocal power to ride herd over massed chorus, orchestra and fellow singers all at once, but she hurls her instrument, at the high notes in particular, with a force that widens your eyes but doesn't always fall sweetly on the ears.

As the ardent suitor who risks life and royal limb to win her, tenor Christopher Jackson's Prince Calaf fared much better; his tone was ringing and firm throughout, and he scored the heartiest bravos of the evening with his stirring rendition of — perhaps the most famous aria of them all — "Nessun dorma." But a pivotal moment at the end of Act II, when he fires back at Turandot's ominous death threat with an affirmation of love and life, got swallowed up by her super-size voice, thus squandering his first opportunity to begin melting her ice-blocked heart.

The finest vocalism and the most persuasive performance of all came from Rebecca Sjowall as the slave girl Liu, who sacrifices herself to save her beloved Calaf. Her "Tanto amore segreto" aria, building up to the suicidal plunge of the knife into her breast, was delivered with great pathos and bell-like clarity.

Kirk Eichelberger, a Festival Opera regular, has a stalwart and authoritarian bass voice, which he calibrated with precision for his role as the downcast Timur, banished king of Tartary and long-lost father to Calaf. Tenor Jonathan Nadel, in an impressively long and flowing white beard, was a bit wobbly as Turandot's father, the emperor Altoum, but then again, his reign was nearing its end, wasn't it?

Comic relief, or as much of it as you can get in a blood-bathed opera with decapitated heads on spikes ringing the stage, was provided by Igor Vieira, Adam Flowers and Michael Mendelsohn as

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the ministers Ping, Pang and Pong. Their Act II opening scene, wherein they bemoan the fate of China and their own misfortunes in equal measure, was a masterful set piece, both choreographically and vocally perfect.

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sgilmore@bayareanewsgroup.com .

Opera Review WHAT: Festival Opera presents Puccini's "Turandot" **WHEN:** 8 p.m. Tuesday and Friday, 2 p.m. July 19 **WHERE:** Hofmann Theatre, Leshher Center for the Arts, Civic Drive and Locust Street, Walnut Creek **HOW MUCH:** \$39-\$100 **CONTACT:** 925-943-7469
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