

# The Post Journal

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Chautauqua Opera Twists Your Heart, Tickle Your Funny Bone

By Robert W. Plyler

CHAUTAUQUA – This week Chautauqua Opera will first wring your heart, then tickle your funny bone, as they present a pair of one-act operas by Giacomo Puccini: *Sister Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi*.

The first is a deeply moving story of a French princess who has been confined in a convent for seven years, because of a youthful indiscretion. The opera spends a good deal of its length setting up the strictness and devotion of the atmosphere in which the young woman is living, until her aunt comes with news that a number of people who are dear to her have died, with an accusation that her error has caused all the death and desolation.

Barbara Quintiliani clearly won the audience's hearts with moving interpretations of the character and a larger, vibrant voice which melded perfectly to the emotions of the moment.

Eugenie Grunewald, as the aunt, also gave a powerful performance which built exactly the sympathy and involvement

from the audience which was needed.

The opera was reviewed in dress rehearsal, by the company's request, but in the many years since we started doing that, conductor James Meena used the heavily-attended dress rehearsal more as a rehearsal than a practice performance than in any other production in my experience. His constant talking made it difficult to understand the already difficult diction of the singers.

The Chautauqua Opera Orchestra sounded taut and clean in support, in spite of what was a rather sparse orchestration.

The plot is so simple and Puccini's music so clear that you'll have no difficulty understanding what's going on.

Following intermission, the spirit of the evening turned to low comedy, for *Gianni Schicchi*.

As the curtain rises, we see wealthy old Buoso Donati take his last breath. Immediately, his family moves in, ready to claim his enormous inheritance, only to find his will, leaving everything to a local order of friars.

Angry, at first, they form a plot to get a neighbor, Gianni Schicchi, to pose as Buoso and write a new will, leaving

everything to them. Naturally, nothing goes as planned, and yet it all works out for the best.

David Ward gave a broad, comic interpretation as the shyster Schicchi.

Alison Bates was lovely in both voice and appearance as the shyster's daughter, who loves Buoso's nephew, but who is considered unworthy of marrying into the wealthy Donatis.

Distinguishing the words was much easier for the second opera.

The settings for both opera were beautiful, although *Sister Angelica's* convent was so dark and the nuns' habits so identical and also so dark that it made it distinguishing characters difficult.

Eric Renschler designed both sets, with lighting by Christopher Ostrom and costumes by Helen E. Rodgers.

Artistic director Jay Lesenger conceived of both productions and directed them both, with a sensitive understanding of how the audience would attach itself to the very diverse stories.

The two operas will be performed today and Monday at 7:30 p.m. in Norton Hall, on the grounds of the Chautauqua Institution.