

OPERA NEWS

IN REVIEW

Suor Angelica & Gianni Schicchi, Chautauqua Opera, 7/24/06



Quintiliani as Suor Angelica in Chautauqua. Courtesy Chautauqua Opera/photo by Christopher Hanewinkel

Il Tabarro, the initial entry in Puccini's 1918 triptych *Il Trittico*, requires a huge orchestra and (basically) the casting requirements of *Tosca*, not easily filled for a two-night summer run at a small festival company. While *Tabarro*'s understandable absence from Chautauqua Opera's second summer offering affected one's experience of the remaining, structurally related works, given in English (as per company policy), the two satisfying sections of *Trittico* that Chautauqua's audiences saw on July 24 had their own integrity. Artistic and general director Jay Lesenger's capably traditional productions of *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi* were admirably conducted by James Meena. The high jinks of *Gianni Schicchi* in particular place considerable demands in swiftness and accuracy on the orchestra, which came through with aplomb.

The gifted Barbara Quintiliani brought to Angelica's compact but exceptionally demanding music a warm, Italianate lirico-spinto comfortably able to encompass the range extremes (including optional high notes many Angelicas leave unsung) and a winningly sincere manner. Quintiliani doesn't — as yet — boast the star presence that ideally must distinguish Angelica in this opera full of women dressed nearly identically. What Quintiliani must work on is projecting character through clearly phrased words: though she sang with considerable feeling, the specific utterances that enliven the moment-to-moment drama rarely made their effect.

It's not uncommon for a Zia Principessa (the only real "diva" part for mezzo in mature Puccini) to let down her hair, kick up her heels and romp through the opportunities afforded *Schicchi*'s scheming Zita. The keys to Eugenie Grunewald's warmly hailed success in both roles were her secure, powerful instrument, striking dramatic presence and unfailing ability to put over her words with maximum clarity. Grunewald gave the company's apprentice artists a good lesson in professionalism: words matter, especially in translated opera. Other notable contributions included Nili Riemer's quicksilver Genevieve and Sarah Heltzel's admirably firm Monitor. Lesenger presented the sentimental (but nonetheless deeply moving) miracle with as close fidelity to the libretto's stage directions as I have ever seen.

Gianni Schicchi had a spirited protagonist in David Ward (replacing the originally announced Brian Davis). Without particular tonal roundness, Ward convincingly crafted his take on the wily rogue through incisive character singing. Alison Bates and Patrick Hogan made an attractive Lauretta and Rinuccio. Bates showed some tonal shine but made little of "O mio babbino caro"; Hogan's cleanly produced lyric tenor projected well. Among the generally well-played greedy relatives, Elizabeth Baldwin proved very funny as a nicely voiced La Ciesca; soprano Tamara Wapinsky (Nella) also displayed bright vocal promise. Timothy McDevitt brought an impressively even, dark-cored bass-baritone to the notary's brief part (also sneaking in an unrecognizable cameo as Buoso's doctor).

Both productions shone visually. *Gianni Schicchi* had been moved temporally from its very specifically prescribed date (September 1, 1299) to "the late 1400s." This shift made hash of the leading rogue's reminder that he appears in the *Divine Comedy* but allowed for sumptuous Renaissance costumes (Helen E. Rodgers) and, in Eric Renschler's well-painted skyline of Florence, the presence of the Duomo (finished in 1436, more than a century after Dante's death). Christopher Ostrom's lighting was keenly deployed and warmly Tuscan

DAVID SHENGOLD