

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

LA BOHÈME

Giacomo Puccini 1896

March 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 2014

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION: Lyric delivers solid, well-sung version of Puccini classic

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Many 18th- and 19th-century operas are just too complicated, with superfluous subplots and random servants running about doing little to further the central story, if there is one. By the end of the 19th century composers and librettists had begun to pare down what I think of as Shakespearean “character overpopulation,” as they found this to be less and less effectual for the more serious and focused themes of Romantic-period opera. *La Bohème* from 1896 owes much of its impact to this new economy: It’s such a concise and concentrated drama that a production rides almost entirely on the delivery of the principals—not just the individual portrayals of these 19th-century Parisian starving artists, but also the complex dynamics between the central pairs of lovers and their cohorts. For its *Bohème* that opened March 15th at the Kauffman Center, the Lyric Opera of Kansas City has assembled a cast of principals ranging from the exceptional to the world-class (though the performers falling into the latter category might not be the ones you’d expect). Directed by Lyric veteran **Linda Brovsky** and conducted by **Craig Kier** in his company debut, the result is a sturdy, honest version that does justice to this most beloved of Italian operas even while it doesn’t entirely sweep us off our feet.

R. Keith Brumley’s wise scenic design is familiar to Lyric regulars: It is an attractive set, though even with the addition of a stage-left window for Acts I and IV, which purportedly looks out on the city, the design for the garret still feels dingily busy. Act II’s set is lovely, with a central set of arches that bring together the row of shops stage right and the Café that dominates the scene. Act II is a tricky one to direct, because a circus-like atmosphere has to be pared down very quickly to focus on the critical action of the principals: Musetta singing her “Quando me’n vo” aria, and Mimì and Rodolfo falling in love before our very eyes. The beginning felt overly busy, and the chorus sounded brash and scattered. By the end of the Act, however, with the stage cleared of frothily costumed choristers and supers, the essentials came back into view. Act III, which is one of everybody’s favorite moments in opera, takes place late at night and as such is often dimly lit. The square at the gates of Paris doubtless had street lamps, but despite **Steve Ross’** sure-footed lighting design in Acts I and II it was difficult to know why Act III was so noticeably overlit, especially downstage. (The gradual dawn in the upstage sky was still effective, though.) Things became steadily regrounded in Act IV, both in terms of production details and stage direction: The way in which everyone but Rodolfo reacted to the realization of what was happening—with silent pauses punctuated by sudden bursts of activity—I found utterly gripping.

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The Lyric has assembled a fine cast: kudos to artistic director **Ward Holmquist** and to **Deborah Sandler**, who in her second season as general director is already reshaping this company in quite positive ways. **Marcus DeLoach** as a blustery Schaunard and **Ben Wager** as Colline and were solidly effective, the latter singing his "ode to an overcoat" ("Vecchia zimarra") with a mixture of gravity and savvily detached humor. **Rod Nelman** was comically befuddled as Benoit but not overly so, his large pate adding to the general high-spirits of the Act I hijinks. **Giorgio Berrugi** sang Rodolfo with sincerity, his clear, shiny tenor lending commitment to the role. He doesn't exude "romantic lead" onstage but his voice is pleasing, even if it at times lacks heft, and he has good command of the heroic idiom. **Ellie Dehn** as Musetta was the ultimate coquette both in voice and demeanor, the muscular brilliance of her Act II aria matched by her jolting pumpkin-colored gown and flame-red hair. (**Martin Pakledinas'** costumes were from Seattle Opera; **Alison Hanks'** wig and makeup designs were playful and smart.)

Katie Van Kooten's Mimì was a complicated mixture of strength and susceptibility. Her singing was impeccable throughout: Though I felt she overcomplicated some of the simpler lines ("Mi chiamano Mimì" of Act I, or toward the end where she admits she knew that Rodolfo had hidden the key), in Acts III and IV, especially, her voice shone through with thrilling beauty and naturalness. This was no wilting wallflower Mimì: Instead of simpering vulnerability we got decisiveness and clarity. In the second half of the opera she seemed almost too strong for someone alleging to be so sick and failing. For me the evening belonged, oddly, to **Lucas Meachem's** Marcello, a secondary role that in his hands threatened to promote him to most important character in the show. His ease of stage presence was palpable throughout and his chocolaty, startlingly lovely baritone commanded the stage each time he sang.

The Kansas City Symphony under Craig Kier seemed unusually committed to the proceedings, and despite some skittish ensemble here and there they delivered full helpings of the lushness and quasi-impressionistic beauty of the score. The string principals provided an exceptional underpinning when needed (as in Act III), and the stentorian brass cries in the last moments were suitably jarring.