

Opera Providence has a laudable double bill Friday, February 3, 2006

BY CHANNING GRAY Journal Arts Writer

Opera Providence continues to gain ground in its efforts to return to a season of fully staged operas. This weekend's double-bill of one-act Italian operas is a couple of cuts above the company's last venture, an amateurish Hansel and Gretel. Janette M. Lallier, a dramatic soprano with a glorious voice, yesterday turned in an impressive performance as Santuzza, the wronged village girl in Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*. And Laura McPherson's attractive sets made all the difference in the world. Lallier and company were heard yesterday morning during a student performance at the Columbus Theatre, where about 600 middle schoolers and high school students cheered and applauded. The regular performances take place tonight at 8 and Sunday afternoon at 3 at the Columbus.

Opera Providence is trying to return to staged productions after a couple of seasons of regrouping and holding free concerts and fundraisers. At this point, it's got costumes and sets but no orchestra. Music director Timothy Steele manned a Steinway grand instead. While it was too bad not to hear those melting strings in the lovely *Intermezzo* from *Cavalleria*, Steele gave a sensitive rendition. The other offering on this double bill is Puccini's seldom heard *Suor Angelica*, or *Sister Angelica*, which tells of a well-to-do woman sent to a monastery for giving birth to an illegitimate child. As Puccini operas go, it's a little sugary, and it lacks the fast-paced intensity of *Cavalleria*. Rhode Island-born soprano Maria Spacagna was to have sung the lead in the Puccini, but was suffering from the vestiges of a virus. One of her star pupils, Nouné Karapetian, stood in for her, and did a more than decent job. Her lament, when learning about her son's death, stood out for its sweetness and control.

In other roles in *Cavalleria*, Frederic Scheff put his ringing tenor to good use as Turiddu, who has left Santuzza for Lola, wife of the teamster, Alfio, sung by the fine local baritone René de la Garza. The cheating Lola was sung by the able soprano Kara Lund. Mezzo Georgette Hutchins, sounding strong and confident, appeared in both operas, first as Turiddu's Mamma Lucia in *Cavalleria*, and then as the aunt of *Sister Angelica*, who arrives at the convent to have some papers signed, and coldly breaks the news that her son is dead. Both productions are sung in Italian with supertitles, the English translations that are projected above the stage.

McPherson's sets are nothing more than painted flats, but they look professional, with depictions of Mamma Lucia's cafe and rolling pine-dotted hills. The same background is used in both shows, except in the Puccini landscape, it is overlapped by arches of church architecture. Performances of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Suor Angelica* take place tonight at 8 and Sunday afternoon at 3 at the Columbus Theatre, 270 Broadway, Providence. Tickets range from \$15 to \$50. Call 621-6123 or go to www.arttixri.com.

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