

Opera review: Canadian Opera Company's solid *La Bohème* succeeds with magical music

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From left: Grazia Doronzio as Mimi, Dimitri Pittas as Rodolfo, Phillip Addis as Schaunard, Christian Van Horn as Colline, Joshua Hopkins as Marcello, Joyce El-Khoury as Musetta and Thomas Hammons as Alcindoro in an Act II scene from the Canadian Opera Company production of *La Bohème* (Michael Cooper photo).

The Canadian Opera Company's season got off to a safe-and-sound start on Thursday night at the Four Seasons Centre with *La Bohème*, a 117-year-old opera by Giacomo Puccini that has been one of the world's favourites ever since its premiere.

In this play, we are whisked into the Romantic world of 19th century Parisian garrets, filled with artists, wannabe artists, poseurs and their friends. There is laughter, love and loss among the poetry and paintings. The rich music is among the most opulently attractive ever written for opera.

All of those elements are honoured with an even directorial hand by John Caird in this tidy, sturdy new co-production with San Francisco Opera and Houston Grand Opera. It rests solidly on a strong, youthful cast and a veteran conductor who turned the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra into pure musical gold.

David Farley's sets, evoking mid-19th century Paris in both garret and street, are cleverly made up of collections of unframed painted canvases. The costumes are correct in their period detail. Michael James Clark's lighting is effective and unobtrusive.

It's difficult to generalize about the singing, because the main roles are all either double- or triple-cast, which means that the experience will be different depending on which of the 12 performances a patron attends.

Opening night featured very strong sopranos: Grazia Doronzio as a flower-girl Mimi with undeniable vocal backbone that belied her consumptive state; and Joyce E-Khoury as a gorgeously extroverted Musetta, a comely *grisette* (that one tiny step better than a prostitute).

The men were fine, with baritone Joshua Hopkins especially compelling as painter Marcello (who takes up with Musetta). Mimi's love interest Rodolfo on Thursday night was American tenor Dimitri Pittas, who showed nice chemistry with Doronzio, but whose much-loved solo arias failed to fully soar.

Bass-baritone Christian Van Horn was a bit brittle but effective as Colline, while baritone Philip Addis was excellent in the relatively light role of Schaunard.

The COC Chorus, only called upon in the middle two acts, did a fine job. The young voices — excellent actors all — from the Canadian Children's Opera Company were a treat in Act II, taking to the stage like a gang of seasoned performers.

While everything above the footlights was marked by a high level of competence, everything below bathed in pure magic.

The COC Orchestra usually sounds fantastic, but conductor Carlo Rizzi, in his Toronto debut, did wonderful things with Puccini's score, highlighting every nuance of what is an incredibly detailed and nuanced piece of music. Although the opera is simple on the surface, each character gets a little musical signature that appears in a different musical setting for each dramatic context — orchestrated with a great deal of care each time.

Iridescent is the word that most comes to mind in describing the sound Rizzi got from the orchestra.

There are many reasons to check out this chestnut of the opera repertoire, even if the whole is not substantially larger than the sum of its well-assembled parts.

Performances continue to Oct. 30. Details [here](#).

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It was interesting to watch Rizzi lose his cool at the podium on opening night.

The audience applauded as the sets began to shift in the transition from Act I to Act II, drowning out the closing bars of the orchestral score for the first act. Rizzi half-turned while conducting to give the audience the evil eye.

The audience repeated its premature applause for the change from Act III to Act IV. This time, Rizzi tried to wave his arms at the audience to end the clapping, but had to keep conducting until the music stopped, at which point he chucked his baton down onto his music stand in frustration.