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Review: Strong, appealing voices highlight Opera San Jose's 'Tosca'

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For many, "Tosca" is Puccini's best opera. The very instant the curtain lifts, the music erupts, never to let up with its melodic flights and dramatic intensity. With its new production, which opened Saturday at the California Theatre, Opera San Jose embraces the heart of "Tosca" -- its music.

The opening night cast was stocked front-to-back with strong and appealing voices, singing this tale of love, political intrigue and state-imposed violence in Rome, circa 1800. I only wish the cast's acting were as assured as its singing: The production, directed by Sandra Bengochea, lacks a firmly ticking dramatic pulse as the story line advances and darkens.

Still, what voices, beginning with soprano Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste, as Floria Tosca, the doomed and love-struck diva. She owns a voice of unusual opulence and hair-raising power -- the raw materials of a star -- and will be closely watched by South Bay audiences throughout this, her first season with the company. Earlier this season, in the leading role of "Anna Karenina," by composer David Carlson, she was thrilling.

Her Tosca was erratic but with an escalating excitement. She began with some weakness in her

low notes, and she finger-painted a few high notes, a little swoopy and off-pitch. But then, in her first scenes with the villainous police chief Scarpia, Jean-Baptiste began to flood the theater with scarifying passion and vocal colors galore.

Her Act II aria "Vissi d'arte" (where Tosca

cries, "I lived for art, I lived for love," yet I face nothing but violence and doom) was mostly exquisite, though she petered out on a crucial high note. Her final moments in Act III, when Tosca's world is collapsing, were absolute zingers.

Prediction: Her upcoming performances should be stirring, as she zeros in on Tosca.

Elsewhere among the leading roles, Alexander Boyer -- in his second season as a resident artist -- was more consistent. He is an exceptional tenor, lyric and sweet-voiced, his high notes bursting forth at key moments.

As the painter Mario Cavaradossi -- Tosca's lover, hunted by the villainous Roman police -- he glowed through his big arias (i.e. Act I's "Recondita armonia") and final rapturous love duets. He suffered a hitch in an occasional note -- oversinging on opening night, perhaps -- but otherwise turned in a sturdy and effecting performance.

Then there was the bad guy: Scarpia, chief of police, a demanding role.

Bass Silas Elash carried it off with sustained power, his voice appropriately taking on the corrosive edge of a villain, though he never quite rose to the level of a thug, which is what Scarpia is.

As Cesare Angelotti -- freedom fighter and friend of Cavaradossi's -- baritone Krassen Karagiozov, was marvelous, his voice resonant and filled with dark-

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coffee colors. As the weak-kneed sacristan, bass-baritone Isaiah Musik-Ayala held forth sonorously.

(The production has two rotating casts. I haven't seen the second, featuring soprano Rebecca Davis as Tosca; tenor Christopher Bengochea, husband of the director, as Cavaradossi; and baritone Torlef Borsting as Scarpia.)

Conductor David Rohrbaugh led the orchestra in a stir-the-pot performance, pulsing and on-point. The sets, designed by Erik Flatmo, are simple, attractive, true to the period. The costumes, coordinated by Alyssa Oania, are vibrant: Tosca's floor-length gowns, one for each of three acts, are lavishly eye pleasing.

What's missing is that ticking dramatic pulse. The production lacks the rhythm of reality.

Here's just one example, among many.

During the Act II torture scene in Scarpia's chambers, Jean-Baptiste (whose acting was dead-on realistic in "Anna Karenina") runs to a set of doors behind which Cavaradossi is being brutalized. She also runs to a second set of doors, trying to escape from Scarfia's henchmen.

But she never runs very hard, and when she arrives at one door or the other, she doesn't throw herself at the door or at the henchman. In fact, she barely struggles, and neither do the henchmen, whose job it is to subdue her. The actors behave as if they know what's going to happen ahead of time -- so why struggle to make the end result look real?

It looks amateurish, which is too bad, because so much of the production is so fine. Director Bengochea and her cast have until Nov. 28 to make improvements.

One last word: Opera San Jose's founder and general director, Irene Dalis, is recuperating in the hospital from a car accident last month, in which she fractured numerous bones. She should know that the theater, at each intermission, was abuzz with audience members talking about her and wishing her well.

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Opera San Jose: "Tosca," by Giacomo Puccini

When: Next performance 8 p.m. Thursday, with additional performances through Nov. 28

Where: California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose

Tickets: \$51-\$101; www.operasj.org or 408-437-4450

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