

Nov. 12 – 27

Calling *La voix humaine*: Opera San José

[OPERA SAN JOSÉ \(/EVENTS-CALENDAR/ORGANIZATION-PROFILES/OPERA-SAN-JOS%C3%A0\)](#)

BY [GEORGIA ROWE \(/AUTHOR/GEORGIA-ROWE\)](#)

La voix humaine remains one of the oddest and most fascinating works in the operatic repertoire. Francis Poulenc's 1959 tragedie lyrique is composed in one act and performed by a single female singer. As Elle, she spends the opera's 50-minute running time on the phone, talking to her soon-to-be ex-lover while fielding interruptions from various crossed lines and wrong numbers. Based on the 1930 stage play by Jean Cocteau, the work is both an intense psychological drama and a beguiling example of Poulenc's compositional skills.



Mezzo-soprano Betany Coffland as the discarded lover in Opera San José's *La voix humaine*
Chris Ayers

Layna Chianakas knows the piece well. The mezzo-soprano sang the role of Elle early in her career. But this month she makes her directorial debut with a new production of "La voix humaine" for Opera San José, with Bryan Nies conducting and two singers — Betany Coffland and Suzan Hanson — alternating as Elle. Chianakas, an assistant professor of voice at San Jose State University, spoke to *SFCV* about the production, which opens on a double bill with Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* Nov. 12 at the California Theatre.

Was your first experience with *La Voix Humaine* as a singer?

Yes. I sang it 14 years ago at Opera San José, when I was a young artist there.

Now you're directing it. Talk about what the audience will see and hear.

First and foremost, it's a play. I think what's unique about it. The way we're approaching it is that it's Cocteau's play, which just happens to be set by Poulenc. Poulenc did such a beautiful job of keeping the dialogue and the conversational aspects of it. There's a lot of recitative, and some tunes. It's a one-sided conversation: the woman is on the phone with her ex-lover, who calls to tell her that he's getting married to somebody else tomorrow. That's the premise, and all we really see is her reactions — to him, to the people on the party line, to the operator. That, in and of itself, is unique. And that's why you need really good actresses to pull it off.

How are you staging it?

I decided to set it in Paris in the early 1950s — the sleek 1950s, not the fluffy ones. I've always been fascinated by film noir, where the telephone is such a leading character. So the whole set is black, white, and grey. I think it's worked out beautifully. We'll have a heightened acting style at the beginning of the opera, and that softens as she becomes more and more real. There's a sense of façade: this woman, who I've always seen as being 'the other woman,' the one who was kept, was actually deeply in love with him. It's very sad, really.

Over 50 minutes, what kind of mood does the work create?

My take on it is that she's a woman who is trying to maintain. She's very put

together. She was on the arm of this man often in certain circles, and he probably was able to keep her quite well in this apartment. When we see her, it's after she's tried to commit suicide the night before. So she's not looking so good. We see that she's beautiful, and she's desperately trying until the very end to put up a semblance of keeping it together.

Poulenc was no stranger to depression — he wrote that the piece was “more or less myself.”

Yes, and he and his lover had just broken up. So he really wanted to set this particular play.

The opera is sometimes done for voice and piano — Poulenc played it himself – and other times in a version for full orchestra. Which version are you using?

We're using the full orchestral version.

What do you admire about the score?

I've been a Poulenc fan for years. I love his art songs and, of course, *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. But what I love about this piece is how it so perfectly fits into the rhythm of the text. It's absolutely perfect, how beautifully the French comes out of the mouth and how easily it's sung. It's very special.

Poulenc wrote the role for Denise Duval, but sopranos from Elisabeth Soderstrom to Jessye Norman have performed it. What does a singer have to have to do this role?

Acting chops. You have to be a terrific actress and then, oh yes, you have to be able to sing. But it's really an acting role. There are so few melody lines, so much recitative, it's just a lot of dialogue. But then you have these little snippets of melody that are like, 'ahhhhh,' beautiful. Betany and Suzan are wonderful, and I told them that when you sing *La voix humaine*, you kind of join this exclusive club of all the other women who have done it. It's so special, and it's something you'll never do again in your life. I think it becomes very personal. Both of these singers are very different, and they each have unique takes on it. I feel very fortunate, for my directorial debut, to be working with them.

What other advice are you giving them?

The challenge is making sure that the piece has a dramatic arc. If you have one dramatic beat throughout, it's going to be boring. It's important to start her as a particular person, and have her end very differently. And the way it kind of ebbs and flows throughout the dramatic arc — I think that's what makes it interesting.

The phone is so important in this piece. Now that we're in the age of cell phones, texts, and tweets, what does it still have to say to an audience?

Well, the irony is, we still get into bad cell areas and we drop calls all the time. So it's not a lot of difference. In this, she gets cut off, they lose the line and the party line comes in. We were talking about this the other day, how the party line makes it so that you really can't do *La voix humaine* updated. How fascinating it would be to do it modern! But what's cool about it is that you're put in the position of imagining what he's saying to her. The singer's job is to convey that. The pauses are everything, right? The silences keep the plot moving forward. That's what's unique about it.

Georgia Rowe is a Bay Area arts writer. Her work has appeared in Opera News, Gramophone, The San Jose Mercury News, The Oakland Tribune, The San Francisco Examiner, and The Contra Costa Times.

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