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# OPERAVILLE

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2012

## Opera San Jose: Bizet's The Pearl Fishers



Sept. 8, 2012

Given the four-year residencies granted its principal singers, Opera San Jose's debut performances carry an added weight. For dedicated patrons (and critics) these aren't just introductions, they're the beginnings of relationships. Call it a first date.

The focus of OSJ's 2012-13 opening was soprano Cecilia Violetta López in the role of Léïla, and it was fascinating to track the way that a new voice works its way through one's neural networks. Her opening lines, as Léïla is welcomed as the guardian virgin of Ceylon's pearl dives, brings an immediate recognition of vocal quality: a lyric instrument, laced with energy. Her first set piece, an incantation to the goddess Siva, reveals expressivity and dynamic range, as well as the basic pleasure of listening to her sure, unforced tone.

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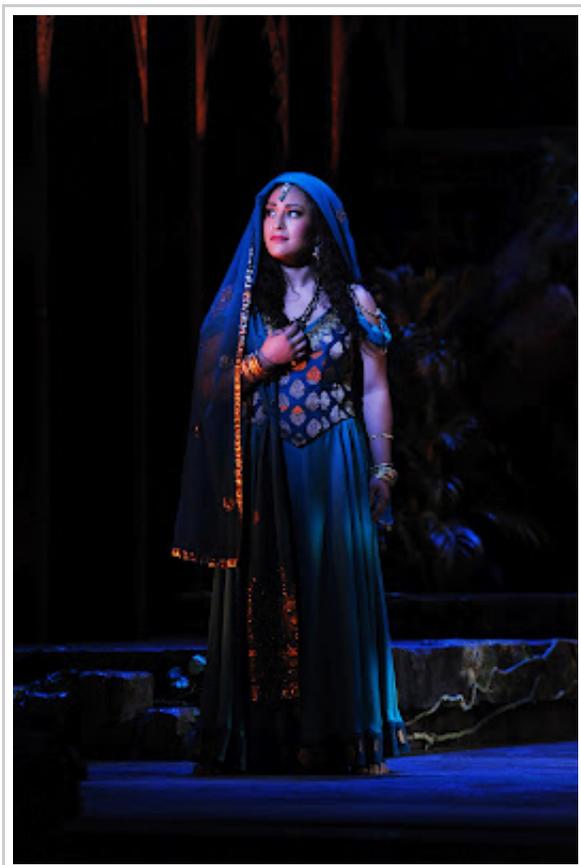
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[MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#)

Having checked off the basics of vocal quality, the critic then waits to hear if the singer's brain is connected to her throat. The question was fully answered by a cadenza in the second-act cavatina, "Comme autrefois dans la nuit sombré." Taking a moment to drift in a bath of sudden silence (always a magical substance at the operahouse), López launches a passage of virtuosic phrasing, both in her tonal colorings and in her lovingly crafted crescendos.

The bonus came in López's acting. In the third act, pleading for the life of her lover, Nadir, she delivered an emotional authenticity reminiscent of a recent OSJ graduate, mezzo Betany Coffland. Denied her lover's pardon, she sparks into anger, in the form of a laser-like top note and an evil eye you would not want to be on the receiving end of.



Michael J. Vaughn is the author of twelve novels, including the recently released "Operaville," available through amazon.com. He is a regular contributor to Writer's Digest, an opera critic, and drummer for the rock band Exit Wonderland. Look for Operaville on Facebook, too.

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The OSJ community is accustomed to welcoming new singers who have talent but a certain rawness, so it's exciting to consider where a singer with such a head start might end up. A fine example was available just across the stage: tenor Alexander Boyer, who arrived in town three years ago with a beautiful lyric tone but a certain awkwardness in the area of dramatics. Thanks to lead role after lead role, Boyer reached something of a peak with last year's "Pagliacci," and now performs with divine assurance. His half of the immortal tenor-baritone duet, "Au fond du temple saint," was absolutely

golden, and he followed by taking his tone to a lighter, more subdued tone for a touching interpretation of Nadir's romantic confession, "Je crois entendre encore."

The famed duet also pointed out some vocal trouble with baritone Evan Brummel, who wasn't quite matching Boyer's volume, and was projecting anxiety all through the first act. The problem seemed to wane in the second act, and Brummel's skills came to full fruition in Zurga's self-tormenting third-act monologue, "O Nadir, tendre ami de mon jeune agé." Bass Silas Elash seemed under-utilized as the high priest Nourabad (perhaps, in general, the price of being a bass), but played the role with an effective bad-cop intensity.

The libretto is a notorious mess (almost a blueprint for the Perils of Pauline film melodramas), but stage director Richard Harrell did a good job of driving his villagers into a suitable frenzy; at the end of Act 2, they nearly pushed the sinful couple off the stage. Andrew Whitfield's chorus is solid start to finish, with a special nod to the tricky backstage chorus at the Act 2 opening, which had to match up in the orchestra pit with Mary Hargrove's piccolo and Mark Veregge's percussion. Another invigorating presence was the dance troupe under Lise La Cour, who created a choreography of not-too-specific primitivism (matching the setting, which drifted from Mexico to Ceylon during the opera's creation). Charlie Smith's set design spans the same bridge, centering on the head of an idol that could be Mayan or Polynesian, and some rough metallic ornaments along the left side of the stage. The featured piece of Elizabeth Poindexter's 2003 costume design is Léïla's brilliant gold-and-blue dress, which links, subtly enough, with the blues and greens of Nadir's peasant garb.

I've been a fan of Anthony Quartuccio for years, and for good reason. He conducted with a smooth touch and elastic feel, giving needed space to both his singers and Bizet's lustrous score, whose rhythms often emulate the waves and tides of his setting. Under his direction, the orchestra sounded majestic.

The ending of the opera has been in flux ever since Bizet set it to paper. This one – using music added by Bizet's contemporary, Benjamin Godard - has poor Zurga stabbed by a villager, struggling backward up the temple steps, then

stumbling through the fire and over the cliff in a Tosca-like leap. Brummel's dive is convincing, and overall this ending works well.

Through Sept. 23, California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose. Alternating casts. \$51-\$111. 408/437-4450, [www.operasj.org](http://www.operasj.org).

Images: Tenor Alexander Boyer and the chorus; soprano Cecilia Violetta López. Photos by Pat Kirk.

Michael J. Vaughn is a 25-year opera critic and author of thirteen novels, including "The Popcorn Girl," available on [Amazon Kindle](#).

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SATURDAY, AUGUST 25, 2012

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