

eye Performance

Flawed 'Pearl' still entertains

Soprano soars in first performance for Opera San Jose

By Richard Scheinin

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Bizet's "The Pearl Fishers" is a silly opera filled with lovely music. It's set on a faux-exotic tropical island — Ceylon in its pre-Sri Lanka days, we're told — where people dress in loose-fitting "Oriental" robes and colorful head-wraps, constantly giving shout-outs to the god Brahma, while dancing around the beach and singing, "La la la la la!"



PAT KIRK/OPERA SAN JOSE PHOTOS

Tenor Alexander Boyer, center, plays Nadir in Opera San Jose's "The Pearl Fishers."

OPERA REVIEW

But it's got a bunch of hit tunes; Frenchman Bizet, who wrote "Pearl Fishers" at age 24, could really turn a melody. On Saturday at the California Theatre, where Opera San Jose opened its 29th season with a new "Pearl Fishers" production, the ripest, most fragrant melodies took wing whenever Cecilia Violetta López, a new soprano with the company, held the stage as Leila. She's the veiled virgin whose arrival in Bizet's beach community drives this tale.

The less said the better about Saturday's first act. The orchestra, conducted by Anthony Quartuccio, was riddled with poor intonation, scratchy string tone and blooped notes, and it was often out of sync with the singers onstage. The chorus was ragged. Two of the leads — tenor Alexander Boyer and baritone Evan Brummel — strained to stay on pitch. And another thing: Was someone grilling steaks in the theater's basement? I'm being serious — it smelled like it.

But back to López, one of six new resident singers with

OPERA SAN JOSE

Presenting 'The Pearl Fishers' by Georges Bizet, libretto by Michel Carre and Eugene Cormon

Through: Sept. 23

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

Tickets: \$51-\$111, 408-437-4450, www.operasj.org

the company.

She arrived during that first act — and seemed a touch nervous, smudging some of her high coloratura lines in her duet with Boyer, who sings the role of Nadir, one of Leila's two competing love interests. In the second act, however, López began to roll. Her voice was opalescent and plush as she sang through a duet with the Brahmin priest Nourabad (mellifluous bass Silas Elash, always rock-solid). Her own *cavatina* followed, and then another duet with Boyer, including a perfumed song of memories (they were lovers once before), "Ton coeur n'a pas compris."

Growing more comfortable, Lopez seemed to have a steadying effect on the whole production, directed by Richard Harrell. Boyer's



Cecilia Violetta López shines as Leila. Her voice grew stronger throughout Saturday's performance.

singing became sweetly lyric — his signature in past seasons. And maybe it was coincidence, but the orchestra coalesced, often sounding lush. The chorus was never spot-on, but it sang with infectious passion — perhaps inspired by an ensemble of fine young dancers from the dancers from Ballet San Jose School and Lise la Cour's LaCademy, choreographed by la Cour.

In the third act, the islanders' king, a fellow named Zurga, is severely ticked about Nadir's secret love

meeting with Leila; he once knew her, too, still loves her and is racked with jealousy. He's had them arrested, threatened them with the death penalty, and now regrets it. It's at this point that baritone Brummel — he is Zurga — sang "L'orage s'est calmé," a sorrowful aria, delivered here with meaty resonance.

Storms, an arson fire, a fatal stabbing — the story keeps moving along. But while the plot lurches, the music is melodious throughout. And if you're interested, López's next performance is today; it will be interesting to see how she develops here and in future roles.

As always with Opera San Jose's productions, "The Pearl Fishers" (which runs through Sept. 23) has rotating casts. The other cast features three more of the company's new resident singers: soprano Melody King, as Leila; tenor James Callon, as Nadir; and baritone Zachary Altman, as Zurga.

Contact Richard Scheinin at 408-920-5069, read his stories and reviews at www.mercurynews.com/richard-scheinin and follow him at [Twitter.com/richardscheinin](https://twitter.com/richardscheinin).

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