

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

OPERA REVIEW

First-rate 'Anna' in San Jose

By Joshua Kosman

CHRONICLE MUSIC CRITIC

Spending time with the aristocracy, of other historical periods or in our own gilded age, can be pleasurable in its way — all that luxury and indolent ease. But you are expected to care about their personal problems.

That's the conflict at the heart of "Anna Karenina" — not Tolstoy's great novel, of course, but the alluring and frustrating opera newly drawn from it by composer David Carlson, which had its West Coast premiere Saturday night at Opera San Jose.

Carlson's score, written in a plush neo-Romantic style, embodies all the most appealing qualities of life among the leisure class. His melodies, parcelled out among a series of carefully delineated arias and ensembles, are gracefully shaped and often beautiful in their outline. The harmonic language is pun-

gent without being too elusive, the orchestral writing colorful, the rhythmic palette varied.

But those virtues are lavished on a tale that, in this attenuated telling, feels uneasily like a soap opera. There is a large cast of characters and some supporting drama, but in essence this is the story of a young woman who escapes her unhappy marriage through an adulterous liaison and comes to a sorry end.

Perhaps it was inevitable that so much of the psychological and philosophical bounty of Tolstoy's masterpiece should be jettisoned from Colin Graham's libretto. No opera short of Wagnerian proportions could have done justice to this source.

But "Anna Karenina," which premiered three years ago at the Florida Grand Opera in Miami, feels particularly telegraphic. It unfolds in a series of short, almost brusque tableaux that are often emotionally evocative, thanks to Carlson's tender in-



Opera San Jose: "Anna Karenina." Through Sept. 26. California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose. \$51-\$101. (408) 437-4450. www.operasj.org.

visual and vocal delight, as well as a reminder that this company is capable of more than just the Puccini and Rossini chestnuts that tend to make up the bulk of its annual offerings.

Conductor Stewart Robertson, who led the Florida premiere, paces things with patience and clarity, drawing vivid colors from his reduced orchestral forces. The staging by director Brad Dalton is crisp and direct, and the physical production (sets by Steven C. Kemp, costumes by Elizabeth Poindexter, lighting by Kent Dorsey) conjures up a world of tasteful extravagance in a few efficient and well-chosen strokes.

Saturday's cast, the first of two alternating throughout the run, did full justice to the work.

The evening's chief glory was the superb performance of soprano Jasmina Halimic in the title role, a virtuoso display of technical prowess and expressive transparency. Deploying her bright-edged and vibrant tone with utmost mastery, she let Carlson's arching vocal phrases convey everything from amorous abandon to wounded pride.

Bass Kirk Eichelberger was a splendid match as her estranged husband Karenin, singing potently and embodying the character's blend of stiffness and sympathy.

Baritone Krassen Karagiozov cut a vague and slightly under-powered figure as Vronsky, Anna's lover, but there were excellent contributions from tenor Christopher Bengoechea as the heedlessly high-spirited Oblonsky, from tenor Michael Dailey and soprano Khorri Dashtoor as Levin and his young wife, Dolly, and from soprano Heather McFadden as the old nurse Agafia Mihailovna.

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LuPone reveals her highs, lows

LuPone from page E1

dom? LuPone seems to think you are. Even when breezing through her Long Island childhood, she spends more time talking about her beloved music teacher at Northport High School than she does about her parents.

Yet that makes sense, in a way, because LuPone knew from an early age that she wanted only to be onstage. As a kid, she and her twin brothers formed a song and dance trio. She studied at Juilliard's preparatory division while still in high school and went on to win a scholarship to the school's drama division, despite an audition scene from "The Taming of the Shrew" that elicited a deadpan response from the school's formidable co-director, John House-

Patti LuPone

A Memoir
With Digby Diehl
Crown Archetype; 324 pages; \$29.99

man: "I don't think that's what Shakespeare had in mind." Her years at Juilliard were a great training ground, in part because there was a concerted effort to get rid of her at the school by throwing her into one unlikely part after another.

Less than 50 pages into the memoir, we aren't surprised that she not only held her ground but also flourished: "(T)he drama division actually made me a versatile actor. ... I was made incredibly strong and pliable over the four years," she writes.

Well, OK, but readers



George Hearn and Patti LuPone in a semistaged "Sweeney Todd" at Davies Symphony Hall.

may soon find that "pliable" part a little hard to swallow, as she battles her co-star, Chaim Topol, in the legitimately ill-fated Stephen Schwartz musical "The Baker's Wife" (from which she's rescued the song "Meadowlark" as a permanent part of her cabaret repertory), blows a gasket when she finds out that her alternate's

reviews have been posted on the walls of the Orpheum Theatre during "Evita" San Francisco tryouts and, ultimately, goes headline to headline with Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber over the casting of "Sunset Boulevard."

"It took a long time, but eventually I let it all go," she writes with a charming lack of credibility.

"I've never been one to hold a grudge."

Even LuPone seems to concede that she's full of it by the time she's sifted through every detail of the humiliating treatment she received at the puffy hands of Sir Andrew in 1993.

In short, despite his pledge that she'd repeat her role as Norma Desmond after the London premiere of "Sunset," he first opened a Los Angeles production with Glenn Close as Norma while the London show was still up, then hired Close to open the show on Broadway.

LuPone seems to care much more about "Sunset" than her readers may, because, no matter what you think of Lloyd Webber, "Sunset" was no "Phantom of the Opera," "Evita" or even (shudder) "Cats." It's a flawed and bloated work with a couple of songs made more famous by Barbra Streisand than anyone who ever descended the show's over-

engineered staircase, and it's probably remembered largely because of the very public dust-up over its casting.

But there are plenty of high notes in LuPone's literary aria, including her hard-won triumph as "Evita," her deliciously diabolical Nellie Lovett in a semistaged "Sweeney Todd," seen at Davies Symphony Hall in 2001, and her Tony-winning triumph in the recent revival of "Gypsy."

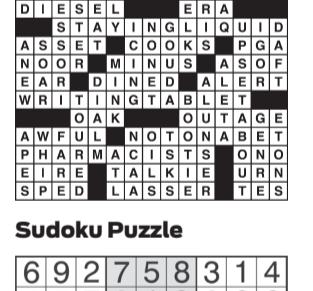
At the moment, she's working on a Broadway musical based on Pedro Almodóvar's "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown," which opens in previews Oct. 2 with Brian Stokes Mitchell and ... Justin Guarini?

Wow, that may merit a chapter in a second volume of LuPone's memoir down the road. If it's half as much fun as volume one, it'll be SRO.

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PUZZLE ANSWERS

Crossword Puzzle



Today's Crossword



Musician keeps Old World sounds alive

Band from page E1

tain air with Alpine standards at the base of the ski hill. The Village Oktoberfest is the only annual public performance by the big band, and most of the musicians will drive up and back in the same day.

"Just playing that music and having people dancing at an Oktoberfest is the joy of it," says Billy Robinson, 77, who caravans from Redwood City, picking up four other musicians and all their lederhosen and instru-

Joe Smiell's Band: The 21-piece big band will play Oct. 2 at the ninth annual Village Oktoberfest in Squaw Valley. (530) 584-6266. www.squaw.com. The five-piece band will play Sun. at Tourist Club SF in Mill Valley. www.touristclubsf.org, and Oct. 1, 8 and 22 at Schroeder's Cafe, 240 Front St., S.F. (415) 421-4778. www.schroederssf.com.

ments, including four 12-foot alpenhorns. This is soft duty compared with the five tours of Japan that Robinson has

taken with Joe Smiell's Band.

"We don't move that much, but we're getting started again, we're getting a second wind," says Smiell, 85, after setting up for a Friday night performance at Schroeder's Cafe.

Smiell is Germanic in that he is not much for verbalizing his style of music other than to say "it's a style that's very musical." But his son and sideman, Joseph Smiell, 58, has a master's degree in ethnomusicology from UCLA, so he's willing to

give it a try.

"Our band is unique, that I know of, to the West Coast in that we play music that's authentic and original to the folk culture of Austria, Germany and Czechoslovakia," he says. "We're really dedicated to the traditional style of music."

In the 21-piece version of Joe Smiell's Band, Smiell conducts with his hand. In the five-piece version of Joe Smiell's Band, Smiell sits down behind his music stand with the edelweiss banner on it and starts the set with an *oberkrainer* (polka) from Slovenia.

Band continues on E3

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