

# Phoning it in is the big challenge

Mezzo-soprano faces demanding one-woman role in 'La voix humaine'

By Richard Scheinin  
rscheinin@mercurynews.com

Saturday, Opera San Jose unveils a most unusual double-bill.

It includes Ruggero Leoncavallo's beloved "Pagliacci," the tale of a jilted man, the clown Canio, who goes off the deep end. If you're into opera, you've probably seen "Pagliacci," know its *verismo* style, love its sad and urgent melodies.

There's a good chance you've never seen its bookend at the California Theatre: Francis Poulenc's "La voix humaine," a 50-minute opera about a jilted woman who goes to the brink, crumbles, barely survives. It has a cast of one, the unnamed woman, who spends the entire opera on the telephone with her lover of five years: "You are the only air I breathe," she tells him, beseechingly, singing in French.

Hers is the only voice we hear, as she cajoles, laughs, cries, lies, hints at suicide, wraps the phone cord around her neck, begs for another chance, says, "I love you." It can be a tour de force, this unorthodox opera, suffused with Poulenc's lush melodies. Based on a one-act play by Jean Cocteau, who also wrote the libretto, the opera premiered in Paris in 1959. In the decades since, singers ranging from Renata Scotto to Jessye Norman to Audra McDonald have sung "La voix humaine."

When Opera San Jose last staged it in 1996, mezzo-soprano Layna Chianakas (then 31 and a resident artist with the company) sang the role. Now she is back as director, guiding mezzo-soprano Betany Coffland (32 and a resident artist) toward her opening night performance as the woman on the brink. (Soprano Suzan Hanson will alternate performances with Coffland.)

I recently sat down with Chianakas and Coffland to talk about "La voix humaine."

**Q** Why now, after 15 years?

**A** Chianakas: A company doesn't choose "La voix" unless it has somebody to do it. First and foremost, it really is Cocteau's play. It's so text-driven and so acting-driven. So you need somebody who's really acting-driven to pull it off. It's just you, you and no one else.

**Coffland:** You and your tele-



COURTESY/CHRIS AYERS

Betany Coffland is taking the solo spot in Opera San Jose's "La voix humaine" for the first time, but she has some expert guidance. Director Layna Chianakas sang the role herself for the company in 1996.

phone.

**Chianakas:** And your neuroses. I wonder if I could put together some kind of a Facebook page — all the people who've ever sung "La voix." It's an exclusive club.

**Coffland:** Layna, one of the first things you said to me was, "This will haunt you for the rest of your life. This will change you." Already it's the hardest thing I've ever had to learn: 70 pages of French.

**Chianakas:** It affected every other role I've ever performed. Up to that point, it was the most vulnerable I'd ever been on stage.

**Q** How did you prepare for it?

**A** Chianakas: I approached it as an art song, a French *chanson*, as opposed to opera. Because the scoring is so light, you can incorporate all these colors, you can bring

all these nuances and effects to the words.

**Q** How are you preparing for the role, Betany? Have you watched YouTube videos of other singers doing "La voix"?

**A** Coffland: I did that early on in the process, just to get some broad ideas, to think about different approaches. I watched Ingrid Bergman on YouTube doing Cocteau's play — not the opera — in English. Very interesting.

**Q** Layna, give us the A-B-Cs of this opera.

**A** Chianakas: She's on this phone. We're only hearing one side of the conversation; to be successful in the role, you must constantly be responding to this unheard other half of the conversation. So, a singer is successful if she can show the

audience what was being said *before* she speaks. That's the difficulty of the role — always reacting before you sing, and before you move.

**Coffland:** And doing that for 50 minutes.

**Chianakas:** I remember highlighting the woman's vulnerability, and making sure she doesn't have one dramatic beat, one dramatic aspect, throughout. She can't just be "Oh, I'm sad" all the time, or "Oh, I'm angry" or "Oh, I'm pathetic." That doesn't work with modern audiences, and especially it doesn't work with modern women. The last thing I want from our audience is to have them wishing she would "just stop talking."

As I see it, she's always been the other woman, never the wife, always the one on his arm, his trophy. This was my challenge when

## POULENC'S 'LA VOIX HUMAINE' AND LEONCAVALLO'S 'PAGLIACCI'

Opera San Jose

**When:** Saturday through Nov. 27

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

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

I sang the role. I have three brothers and I was *such* a tomboy. Until that time, I was primarily singing trouser roles, so performing "La voix" really helped guide me to that feminine side of my personality; it helped lead me into Carmen and other strong, yet feminine, female characters.

**Q** Betany, do you think Cocteau understands this woman?

**A** Coffland: Absolutely. This woman is saying goodbye to a lover, remembering the good parts of the relationship, and sometimes going into denial, and going crazy.

**Chianakas:** And she blames herself a lot: "I'm the stupid one." "This is my fault." Do you think a little of that goes a long way?

**Coffland:** I do. You want to see the moxie in her.

**Q** How do you relate to her?

**A** Coffland: No matter how hard you try, you're always playing part of yourself, with any role. And I've had my heart broken, by my first love, and I've had to say goodbye. And it's my feeling about "La voix" that she and the man on the other side of the phone conversation — theirs *was* a real love story. And to have to relive that every night on stage, knowing that it's not going to work out — that's hard. It's draining.

**Chianakas:** There are roles that I did 15 years ago and I don't remember. With this, the text is just *there*. It's in you.

**Coffland:** I love playing real characters. This woman is not being honest with herself at the beginning, and then has to be.

**Chianakas:** And the audience is the voyeur. They're watching something they shouldn't be seeing, watching her crumble.

**Coffland:** It's like reality TV. It's so honest and real that you want to look away. But you can't.

Contact Richard Scheinin at 408-920-5069.