



Betany Coffland

Credits: P. Kirk

Two Slices of Life

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Opera San Jose presented two operas this Saturday night: [La Voix Humaine](#) (1959) by [Francis Poulenc](#) (1899-1963) and Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) contrasting with [Pagliacci](#) (1892) by Ruggero Leoncavallo (1877-1919).

On many fronts, the two could not be more dissimilar. *La Voix* is a one-woman show; *Pagliacci* has a full cast with supporting chorus. *La Voix* is a real-time glimpse into a life; *Pagliacci* has the traditional structure and artificiality of a performance. *La Voix* has a broad harmonic palette and phrases that run on end; *Pagliacci* sticks mostly to old-school triadic progressions and evenly metered phrases. In *La Voix*, my eyes followed the supertitles in a vain attempt to understand what was going on. In *Pagliacci*, the plot was clear just by watching the drama on stage.

The two operas also had many similarities. They are both by widely recognized but not-so-often performed composers: Poulenc from Paris and Leoncavallo from Milan. They are both relatively short, but very immediate. Both are about, as the program note explains, those who "love too much and too long," and both end in tragedy. (Sorry if this is a spoiler... but who really goes to the opera for the plot? It's obvious that she dies at the end-- it's practically expected. The reason to go to the opera is to hear and see how it happens this time).

The contrast was only in style; at the core, the two operas are one and the same-- they have the same dramatic substance-- how emotions let loose can ruin lives. The commonality tied the two works together but the opposite stylistic angles made the presentation as a whole well-balanced. This is a great example of innovative programming-- something adventurous yet enticing-- an invigorating respite from the rotation of the top ten bestselling operas.

A one-woman show can be a tough sell. It sounds too artsy, right? It was one of the most compelling performances I have seen this season. Betany Coffland (soprano) plays an unnamed woman alone in her apartment, going through a bad breakup, desperately holding onto her lover via the telephone. (Today we changed our means of obsession to cellphones and Facebook, but even 100 years ago we had ways to stalk and obsess over other people in our lives. In both cases, our obsessions are still hampered by inadequate technology-- dropped calls, slow 3G connections, etc). The entire opera is set in her room, the edges of the black-walled chamber accentuated by protruding white curves and stylized like a Picasso scribble to give the scene a blurry, intoxicated feel.

The woman gorges alcohol, pills, cigarettes, her mood swings from elation when she connects with her lover on the phone, to utter desperation when the connection is lost. Coffland performed admirably, maintaining the on-stage vitality of the show all by herself and acting out the full range of emotions without holding back. She looked right at home in her lonely room on stage, as if there were not a thousand people watching her go from sexy to ugly to insane. Yet the true star of the show was the orchestra.

Bryan Nies inspired OSJ's small but mighty orchestra to follow all the mood swings inside the crazy protagonist's head. The orchestra would switch from swooning waltzes when Coffland soared on lines of elation to Stravinsky-like harsh percussive hits in moments of violent desperation. Hazy Wagner/Debussy chords hung in the balance between these intense moments. It was like listening to a symphony-- there was that much musical intensity in the orchestra. The energy flowed between the orchestra and Coffland in both directions.

After such heavy material, *Pagliacci* was a welcome relief. At first appearing to be a comedy, this opera too turns darker in its second half-- not to worry. But its overall tone is more pleasing, though it too is intense. *Pagliacci* has remained popular in part thanks to its use of the ever-charming *Commedia dell'Arte*. The large cast is lively throughout. A rousing prelude by Evan Brummel as Tonio the hunch-backed fool set the bar high for the rest of the evening.

The [double bill](#) runs through Nov. 27, 2011.

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