

OPERA SAN JOSE

'La voix' shines, 'Pagliacci' can't compare

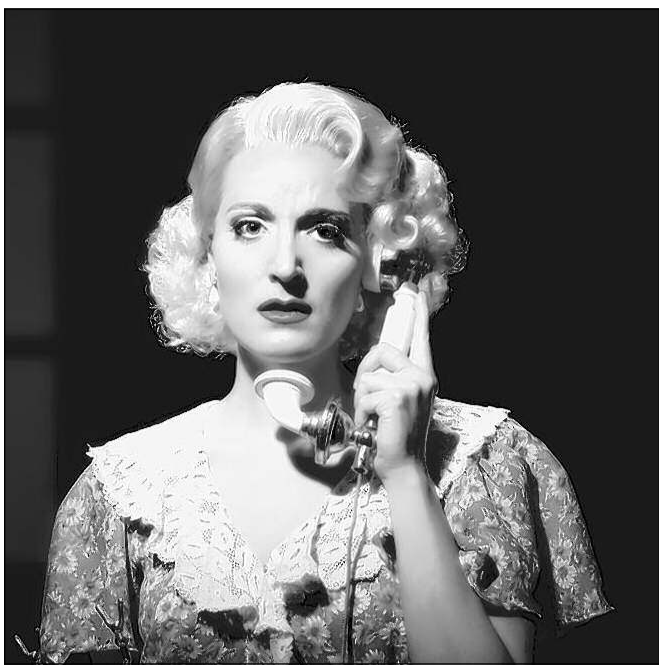
French sophistication reigns in double-bill opera performance

By Richard Scheinin

French composer Francis Poulenc's "La voix humaine" ("The Human Voice") shows us a young woman falling to pieces when her long-term lover phones to deliver the news: He is leaving her. It is painful, this opera, with its libretto by Jean Cocteau. For 50 minutes, the jilted woman roams her apartment, tethered to the phone, desperately extending the conversation and gradually crumbling.

Like reality TV, "La voix" — which has one act and a cast of one, the woman known as "elle" (or "she") — is excruciatingly private, turning audience members into voyeurs. Do we really need to see this? Well, yes; it fascinates. And lustrous-voiced mezzo-soprano Betany Coffland fascinates as the star of Opera San Jose's smart new production of "La voix," which opened Saturday at the California Theatre.

It's part of a double-bill with Ruggero Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci," another short opera — and thematically related, as it tells the story of a jilted man. This is imaginative programming: gutsy Italian verismo meets film noir-ish



CHRISTOPHER AYERS

Mezzo-soprano Betany Coffland as the discarded lover in Opera San Jose's "La voix humaine."

French sophistication, each feeding off stories of obsessive love affairs. This time, French sophistication wins, largely because of Coffland's confidently sustained performance, in which she explores progressive states of emotional breakdown, her voice as shimmering and plush as Poulenc's score.

(I should mention that Coffland alternates performances with soprano Suzan

Hanson, whom I haven't seen. With each production, Opera San Jose presents a pair of rotating casts.)

Amazing heartbreak

Premiered in Paris in 1959, "La voix" is based on Cocteau's eponymous monodrama from 1930. The original stage version has been a vehicle for Simone Signoret, Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann, while Renata Scotta, Jessye

OPERA SAN JOSE

Presenting Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci" and Poulenc's "La voix humaine"

Through: Nov. 27 (with rotating casts)

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

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

Norman and Audra McDonald are among the divas who have starred in the opera, a rare solo vehicle for female singers. Having watched a potpourri of "La voix" performances on DVD and YouTube in recent weeks, I can report that Coffland's performance is top notch.

She is guided by Layna Chianakas, another mezzo, who starred in Opera San Jose's 1996 production of "La voix," and who makes her debut as stage director with this production. It finds Coffland roaming her character's spacious Parisian apartment, which is suavely done up in blacks, whites and grays — very midcentury, these sets by J.B. Wilson, with a Cocteau line drawing on one wall and a vase of hot-red roses on the coffee table.

Forever grasping the phone — it's her umbilical cord, "the only thing left," the woman says, "that connects me to us" — Coffland sings to

her ex-lover, who, she learns, is to be married to another woman the next day. Pacing in her silver nightgown, she smokes, pours herself drinks, gets kittenish or cajoling, threatening or hysterical, wrapping the bright red phone cord around her neck or rolling in a fetal position on the floor.

It's a highly detailed performance that feels natural, flowing with the storyline. Extended passages of recitative erupt into lush melody, reflecting some fond memory or camouflaging some revelation, including the woman's suicide attempt with pills. As the conversation grows ever darker, Coffland's voice matches the smoky colors of the score. All the while she is in conversation with the orchestra; crisply conducted by Bryan Nies, it represents the unseen ex-lover on the other end of the line with its spiky outbursts, its sighs, hesitations, doom chords and pungent textures.

This is Coffland's fourth and final year as a resident artist with the company. She has previously given some fine performances, but her "La voix" was a tour de force.

Clunky clown

It was followed by "Pagliacci," drab by comparison. Literally. Wilson's sets, so striking in "La voix" are plain

blah here; the action, set in a southern Italian village, looks as if it is taking place at the base of a concrete exit ramp at an American baseball stadium.

The cast and chorus looked boxed in by the set — and the performance, directed by Cynthia Stokes, felt similarly uncomfortable, clunkily moving between plot points and missing the streamlined character development that "Pagliacci" requires. Still, several big numbers were effective enough in this tale of a traveling theater troupe, which gives a performance that takes on real-life overtones and ends in violence.

The famous Prologue was vigorously sung by Evan Brummel, a sirloin-voiced baritone, as Tonio, the hunchback clown. The love duet between Nedda (wife of Canio, who runs the troupe) and Silvio (Nedda's local lover) was delivered with a rush of fireworks by soprano Jasmina Halimic and baritone Krassen Karagiozov.

As cuckolded Canio, tenor Alexander Boyer sang "Vesti la giubba," one of the best known arias ever composed, with lyric breadth and meaty tone. Though he sometimes seemed like too nice a guy for the role, Boyer dispatched the final violence with stabbing aplomb.

Contact Richard Scheinin at 408-920-5069.

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