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French Opera in Sri Lanka

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RATING FOR OPERA SAN JOSÉ'S THE PEARL FISHERS.



The duet begins simply, calmly... two Sri Lankan fishermen who have been diving for pearls all their life together fall in love with the same priestess:

*Au fond du temple saint
Paré de fleurs et d'or,
Une femme apparaît!*

At the back of the holy temple,
decorated with flowers and gold,

A woman appears!

The lazy tropical duet grows, encouraged by flutes and a shimmering string accompaniment, until they reach a climax on these words:

Son voile se soulève!

Ô vision! ô rêve!

La foule est à genoux!

Her veil parts slightly.

What a vision! What a dream!

The crowd is kneeling.

Tenor **James Callon** and Baritone **Zachary Altman** recreated this magical moment-- the focal point of **Georges Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers***, now playing at the California Theater to open [Opera San Jose](http://www.operasj.org) (<http://www.operasj.org>)'s 2012-2013 season. Listening to the pair throughout the rest of the evening, I wouldn't have expected their voices to blend so well. Altman is a very powerful presence-- volume that comes at the expense of gentle phrase endings. Callon, by contrast is very melodious but not nearly as strong. Both singers are still honing their craft, their voices still malleable, still without superstar egos. Perhaps that is why their duo sounded so amazing. I have heard other [recordings \(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDn_t4tEWiQ\)](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDn_t4tEWiQ) of better known opera stars that don't blend nearly as well because they cling to their signature styles on top of each other. But Callon and Altman created a new mix that was the best of each other's abilities. This duet holds the opera together; the theme returns at key moments throughout the opera and it was crucial to get it right, which they did.

As for the priestess Leila, played by **Melody King**, she didn't do anything specifically wrong but couldn't muster the necessary passion to pass as truly in love enough to risk her status as the temple virgin. She came off as a victim of her own beauty and the fishermen's lust rather than a full-fledged protagonist. Her introduction scene was made spectacular by dramatic choreography and fabulous flute playing and tremolo strings in the orchestra under **Anthony Quartuccio**.

The *Pearl Fishers* has several alternate endings. You know someone is gonna die... but who? The boys? the girl? all three? What is it with the French and their *menages à trois*? Without revealing too much, I'll say that Opera San Jose usually goes with the happiest of the possible endings... but what about this time?

The chorus added tremendous energy to this production, driving the plot by shifting from joyous celebrations to frantic riots filled with a barbaric rage. But it was strange to hear supposed savages singing European chorales with such refinement. The thing that bothers me about this and other 19th century Operas set in exotic locales (Verdi's *Aida*, Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* to name a few) is that the music still sounds European. The set is exotic, as are the costumes. But the music might as well be set in a French chateau or a cathedral. In the era of world music-- when we all know that South Asian music would probably include Ragas, sitars, and non-western harmonies and scales, superimposing that culture with European Romantic music seems implausible-- it feels downright colonial. This little critique is aimed at Bizet and his contemporaries' orientalism rather than OSJ.

Dead composers are not beyond reproach, are they?

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Report



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