NOV 9, 2023

Wexford Festival Opera 2023 Review: Suor Angelica

McLean Produces An Emotionally Strong Performance As Suor Angelica

By Alan Neilson

(Photo: Padraig Grant)

Each year, Wexford Festival Opera presents a number of Pocket Operas (Opera Beag), short operas played to piano accompaniment, performed during the afternoon in the opera house's smaller Jerome Hynes theatre or other small venues in the city. Although they are usually low-budget productions, they are usually hugely entertaining and musically to a high standard. This year, there were two offerings, the first of which was Puccini's 1918 one-act opera "Suor Angelica," which, with a running time of approximately 60 minutes, was perfectly suited for the occasion.

The simple narrative, set in a convent, tells the story of Sister Angelica, who, following a pregnancy out of wedlock, is forced to give away the baby and enter the nunnery. In typical Puccini style, he ensures that her situation deteriorates dramatically, to the point that she commits suicide after her aunt arrives to pressure her into signing away her inheritance and to inform her that her child is dead.

From The Nunnery To A Cult

Certainly, it is not a tale that resonates as closely today as when it was written. Values have changed. The stigma associated with unmarried motherhood has diminished, and the idea of forcing women into convents is now seen as a form of abuse, if not worse. The attitudes towards the church, even in staunchly Catholic countries such as Ireland and Italy, have shifted to the point that today, there are relatively few nuns and convents to be found. This is something of which the director, Grace Morgan, was acutely aware, and she wanted no nuns or a convent in her production.

Rather, she focused on the fact that the opera was dealing with a community made up exclusively of women and gave the work a 'new age' twist. Taking inspiration from the 'Silver Sisterhood,' an all-female Christian cult found in Donegal from 1982 to 1992 that existed to support women who were searching for a more peaceful, nature-oriented way of life, she created a reading that looked at Sister Angelica's story as if she were a cult member.

Cults are built on promises made by charismatic leaders, and rarely, if ever, do their promises turn into a reality. Thus, we find Angelica, who has joined the all-female community in order to find some sort of peace and contentment from the suffering she has experienced in the outside world, still struggling with her demons. When her aunt arrives, the support and promises of the cult prove to be inadequate, and Angelica takes her own life.

It was a convincing reading and played out well. Lisa Krugel's set and costume designs were simple yet very effective. The women all wore white slips except for Angelica's aunt, who was dressed in smart, fairly normal clothes. The stage was dominated by a fountain and a wheelbarrow containing plants, suggesting that the cult was pantheistic. Often, the women would gather together as a group and take part in ritualistic movements, on one occasion using candles, a typical prop of adherents to 'new age' philosophies. The uniformity of dress and the ritualistic behavior bound the women together into a single body. Angelica, however, remained separated, sitting at the edge of the performance area. She could not fully adapt. The cult was unable to provide what she needed. Suicide was her only way out.

McLean's Compelling Portrait Of Suffering & Despair

The lead role of Suor Angelica was given a fine portrayal by soprano Lorna McLean. She possesses a secure, resonant voice that is able to move freely across the range without any loss of quality. Her upper register is strong and has an attractive tone. It is also a layered voice with plenty of depth that is able to depict the magnitude of Angelica's emotions. It was a compelling and expressive performance that got better the further she slid into the emotional abyss, to which she responded by upping the intensity with which she coated the vocal line with her heartfelt anguish, suffering, and despair.

After her aunt departs, having broken Angelica's heart and left her with nothing to live for, she gives voice to her deepest thoughts and emotions in a series of verses, including the famous aria "Senza mamma." It was a splendid moment in which McLean captured the full poignancy of the situation and brought the opera to a satisfying conclusion.

Angelica's aunt, La Principessa, was played by mezzo-soprano Grace Maria Wain. She was suitably cold, hard-headed, and aloof. Her phrasing was sharp, and her voice was coated with a vicious curl. The words were clearly intoned and delivered with controlled precision. She cut a very unpleasant figure with what was a very convincing performance.

The sisters, who all had relatively small parts, were all up to the task, but there were one or two notable performances. Soprano Zita Syme as Suor Genovieffa made the most of her role, showing off her well-crafted phrasing and her bright, piercing voice to good effect, while mezzo-soprano Erin Fflur created a strongly defined portrait of La Maestra, which allowed her to show off the varied and appealing colors of her palette.

The other sisters were played by sopranos Emma Jüngling, Susie Gibbons, and Kathleen Nic Diarmada, and mezzo-sopranos Helen Maree Cooper and Dominica Williams.

It would have been wrong to have expected the music director Giorgio D'Alonso on the piano to have been able to recreate Puccini's lush and sonorous score on the piano, but he did a remarkably fine job. His playing was always sensitive to the dramatic intent and had a beautiful clarity and fluency, which was able to captivate the audience. The melodies were delightfully delivered, and the overall structure of the piece was carefully maintained.

This was not a show for the main stage. It was a low-budget venture. It was never going to deliver the brilliance and opulence of a fully staged performance, but it was very good and was thoroughly enjoyed by the audience.

Categories Reviews Stage Reviews

By Alan Neilson

Alan Neilson has been with OperaWire since 2017 and has been a major fixture in providing reviews and interviews throughout Europe, with an emphasis on Italian opera houses as well as such festivals as the Wexford Festival and the Innsbruck Early Music Festival, among others.

Originally a graduate in Economics, he went on to study a further degree in Opera Studies, qualifying with First Class Honours.