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Seeing Is Believing In *The Secret Garden*

BY [JANOS GEREBEN \(/AUTHOR/JANOS-GEREBEN\)](#) , *March 3, 2013*

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Scott Joiner (Dickon Sowerby), Michael Kepler Meo (Colin) and Sarah Shafer (Mary Lennox) *Photo by Betsy Kershner*

At 15 minutes, the first act of Verdi's *Rigoletto* is among the shortest in all opera. At about half of that time, the first scene (the prologue) of Nolan Gasser's [The Secret Garden](#) (<http://sfopera.com/Season-Tickets/2012-2013-Season/The-Secret-Garden.aspx>) covers more

ground than the six-hour *Parsifal*.

As told in Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1910 novel, the opera — with Carey Harrison's libretto — introduces 10-year-old Mary Lennox, both neglected (by her British parents) and spoiled (by servants in India where the family lives), an angry, rude little girl, and then brings on an epidemic of cholera, killing just about everybody but Mary, who is then shipped off to relatives in Yorkshire.

The opera takes eight minutes to accomplish all that. Just think of all the exotic, eminently *operatic* story missed when, among other shortcuts, Mary's initial unpleasant nature is established only by her throwing her hat on the ground.

As a joint effort by S.F. Opera General Director David Gockley and Cal Performances Matías Tarnopolsky to introduce opera to children and families, *The Secret Garden* is playing in its Zellerbach Hall world premiere to audiences packed by ... children and families.

At the Sunday matinée, I might have felt dizzy by the swift pace of the work, but it didn't seem to bother others. In fact, the above-mentioned children and families were quiet and responsive all the way through, cheering lustily at the end. The Gockley-Tarnopolsky plan is getting the seal of approval.

Those in the audience more used to opera tried to start clapping at the end of a rare aria or duet, but Gasser's relentless pacing did not make that possible. Although pleasant and well-suited to voices, the music has its weakness in the apparent reluctance or inability to slow down, open up and, dare one say, blossom. This is true, even against Sara Jobin's fine direction of a 10-instrument orchestra from San Francisco Opera, and a cast of singers ranging from good to excellent.

How to find a lyric soprano with power to carry pretty much the entire opera as Mary? Whoever found Sarah Shafer, a Curtis Institute student already on a professional career track, to sing the role is a casting genius. Shafer — probably around 20 in real life — maintained the illusion of a teen, even while singing with Wagnerian power. For occasional, and inconsequential, lapses into adult body language responsibility is shared by Shafer (too busy with the score, rightfully so) and stage director José Maria Condemi — who did fine work otherwise.



Ao Li (Ben Weatherstaff) and Sarah Shafer
Photos by Peter DaSilva

The other 10-year-old principal in the story (*Moonrise Kingdom* is about a pair of slightly more mature 12-year-olds) is also wondrous, former boy soprano, now fledgling tenor Michael Kepler Meo, all of 13.

Amazing.

He sings both the role of a rajah who enters, bows, and dies of cholera all within a minute, but then he carries an important part of the story as Colin Craven, the apparent invalid, who is saved by Mary and the magic of their garden. The mysterious introduction of the character as the curtain falls on the first act is a theatrical coup.



Sarah Shafer with servants in India - briefly

Adler Fellows Erin Johnson (Mrs. Medlock), Laura Krumm (Martha), Marina Harris (Martha's mother), Philippe Sly (Archibald Craven, Colin's father, and the singer with *the* aria), and Ao Li (gardener) are all excellent; with an especially appealing, warm voice and great stage presence, Krumm is performing as first among equals. I wish Scott Joiner — in a splendid performance as the key figure of Dickon Sowerby — were also in the Adler program so we would hear him more often.

Pictures from the production may look too busy, color-saturated to excess, but in the theater Naomie Kremer's visual design — intermingled projections and videos — looked fabulous, probably being responsible to some extent for the kids' rapt attention.

There are two more performances next weekend; take the children or somebody of any age.

Janos Gereben (<https://www.sfcv.org/author/janos-gereben>) appreciates news tips, corrections, and words of encouragement at janosg@gmail.com (<mailto:janosg@gmail.com>).

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