

Bay Area Opera Review: THE SECRET GARDEN (Cal Performances and SF Opera at Zellerbach Hall)

by [Stacy Trevenon](#) on March 7, 2013

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A PERFECT CHILDREN'S STORY FOR OPERA, BEAUTIFULLY STAGED...BUT IS IT READY FOR CHILDREN?

I confess to being passionately attached to the score for the successful stage musical, [The Secret Garden](#) by Lucy Simon and Marsha Norman (1991), but translating Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic children's novel – the story of Mary, a spoiled 19th-century 11-year-old sent to live with her dour uncle Archibald after cholera decimated her family in India – into the context of opera seemed like an undertaking waiting to happen. Through a commission by the San Francisco Opera (co-presented by Cal Performances), it did, and while the opera itself still needs some tinkering for it to appeal to younger audiences, overall I was quite taken with the stunning and impressive production, which opened last weekend in its world premiere at UC Berkeley's elegant Zellerbach Hall.



The condensed storytelling is beautifully complemented by Nolan Gasser's fluid score, which still needs work in the arena of melodic invention, but eventually bursts forth with a lush bouquet of harmonies in the final scenes in the blooming garden. The colorful characters are brought to three-dimensional life by librettist Casey Harrison's adaptation: spunky domestic Martha (mezzo-soprano Laura Krumm), whose cheerful

down-to-earth approach is what Mary needs in her transition to the mansion; Martha's brother Dickon (a sprightly Scott Joiner); gardener Ben Weatherstaff (Ao Li, who turns in a characterization as solid as the earth itself); the matronly house overseer Mrs. Medlock (Erin Johnson, with just the right flavor of 19th-century propriety); and Martha and Dickon's mother, Susan Sowerby (Marina Harris), whose gentle presence helps resolve the tensions brought about by the inquisitive Mary and her tormented and resolute uncle Archibald (a resonant and compelling bass-baritone Philippe Sly), embittered by the loss of his wife and withdrawn into himself and his work.



It all revolves around Sarah Shafer's impressive SF Opera debut as Mary. Shafer shifts effortlessly from a petulant pampered child in India to an English girl filled with insatiable curiosity about the enigmatic garden, and deep compassion towards Archibald's sickly son Colin, played by Michael Kepler Meo, who at only 14 astonishes with his ringing tenor and powerful performance. Ultimately, Shafer has an irrepressible spirit that embodies the life in the garden itself.



Directed by Jose Maria Condemi, the story came to life on a spacious stage below a soaring set which towered over the actors – an effective device in underscoring how Mary must have felt to find herself so tragically transported into a dark old mansion filled with mystery. But she's up to the challenge, and she meets it on a set that's a piece of living art in itself. A backdrop of austere walls alternates with a garden scene, at first neglected and weedy and then, under Mary's compassionate touch, taking on hues of green and eventually bursting into bloom. In that process, it parallels Mary's effect on the household. The set showcases the considerable creative talent of Naomie Kremer, who overlays canvas and paint with video to make a beautifully shaded, detailed, ever-shifting, shimmering landscape – aided by Christopher Maravich's lighting design. One delightful visual touch was that of an animated robin that is key to the story. That effect underlines and reinforces what I think of as a touching and inarguable message of the play: that life pulses even in the darkest of circumstances, just waiting for a touch of awareness to spring it forth into full health.



The Secret Garden fits beautifully into the format and style of opera and I greatly enjoyed seeing it as such. While this production proved that it is a beautiful fit for opera lovers, I wondered if the younger viewers, beautifully dressed for an afternoon at the opera along with their parents and grandparents, were offered the best vehicle for this children's story. The score (confidently conducted by Sara Jobin) is not yet as magical as the trappings and the full-bodied vocals of some of the principals, with the exceptions of Sly and Harris, posed some aural challenges. Supertitles certainly helped, but I worried for children who may not have been adept at visually flicking from supertitles to stage. Fortunately, the youngsters left with smiles because they were accompanied by adults eager to explain what was going on.



photos by Betsy Kreshner/Peter DaSilva/CalPerformances/San Francisco Opera

The Secret Garden

commissioned by San Francisco Opera

presented by Cal Performances and SF Opera

Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley

scheduled to end on March 10, 2013

for tickets, call (415) 864-3330 or visit <http://www.sfoopera.com>

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