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## Review: 'The Secret Garden' at Zellerbach Wins Thumbs Up

Here's one opera that appealed to 10-year-olds – an adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1910 novel, presented by Cal Performances and the San Francisco Opera at Zellerbach Hall through March 10.

By Berkeley Editor, Patch Staff (<https://patch.com/users/berkeleyeditor1060633>) | Mar 7, 2013 12:15 am ET | Updated Mar 7, 2013 1:44 am ET

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By Caroline Crawford  
Bay City News Service

The 10-year-olds sitting in front of me at Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall on Friday for the new opera "The Secret Garden" not only stayed awake during the performance; they gave it a thumbs up.

Commissioned by San Francisco Opera Director David Gockley and presented together with Cal Performances, "Secret Garden" is based on Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1910 novel every child of a certain age remembers.

The tale is about a pampered and unpleasant 10-year-old British girl who is shipped from India to an uncle in England when her parents, who have been indifferent to her upbringing, die.

Carey Harrison's succinct libretto tells the story simply: Mary Lennox is taken off to a morbid mansion in England, runs into an invalided cousin named Colin and comes to life in an abandoned garden that becomes a passion.

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Composer Nolan Gasser's score doesn't have much in the way of tunes to go home with and touches only briefly on the darker side of the story, but the music travels lithely from the rhythms of India to the North of England, and the children's music carries the narrative clearly. Sara Jobin, who has conducted another of Gockley's "family operas," "The Little Prince," and other works for San Francisco Opera, drew lush sound from the 10-player orchestra.

The opera is a new wrinkle on a good story that already has many stage and musical adaptations, and Naomie Kremer's settings with video overlays are magical, with eye-catching animations stirring in lush projections.

Jose Maria Condemi's staging helps to sort out the somewhat complicated story. It is hardly reasonable to expect the perfectly spoiled Mary Lennox to achieve perfect happiness at the end of the opera or the invalid Colin and his emotionally crippled father to come to terms with everything as they do, yet it is all quite believable.

Sarah Shafer sings the role of Mary vividly, well supported by a cast made up largely of Adler Fellows, including Ao Li, Laura Krumm, Marina Harris, Erin Johnson, and a robust-voiced Philippe Sly as Mary's uncle (he will appear in the SFO summer production of "Cosi fan tutte").

Fourteen-year-old Michael Meo is marvelous as Mary's cousin, and Scott Joiner is their companion Dickon.

David Gockley is to be commended for his commitment to commissioning and for looking to audiences of the future. "The Secret Garden" will be performed at Zellerbach Hall through March 10.

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