

Berkshire Opera Festival, Pittsfield, MA

LA BOHEME. Music by Giacomo Puccini, Libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa.
Conducted by Brian Garman. Directed by Jonathan Loy.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

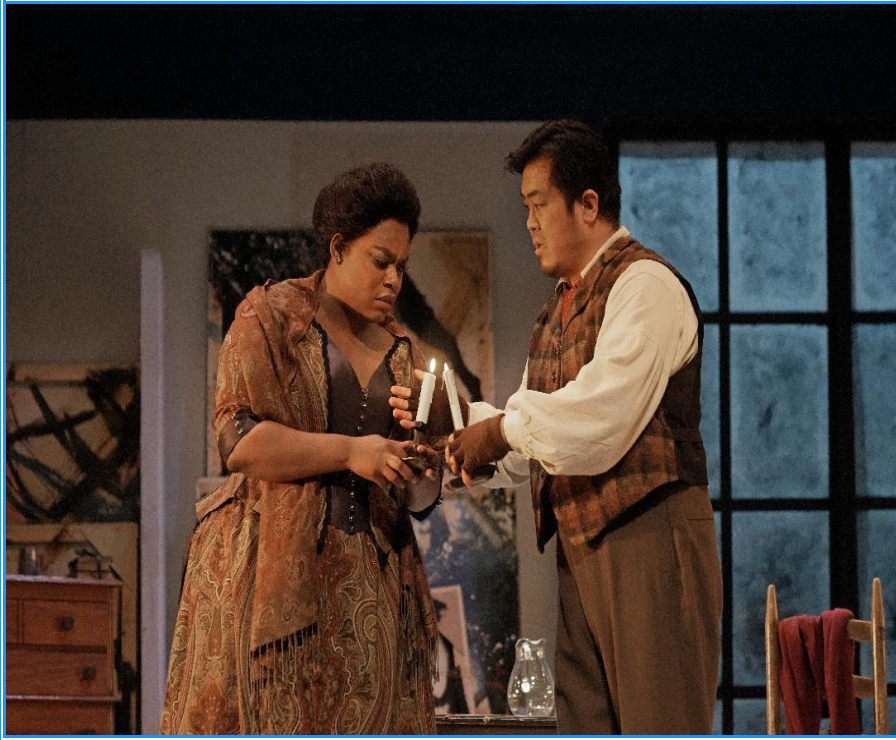
“Quando men vo (What would you like)”

On the stage, and in the pit, of the Colonial Theatre, Berkshire Opera Festival is having a very good time with Puccini’s ever-popular “La Boheme,” a comedy/tragedy most opera lovers know by heart by now. Written in four acts and based on Henry Murger’s “Scenes de la vie de la Boheme” it tells the story of a furtive love affair between neighbors. Rodolfo, a poet, cannot pay his rent or buy food, but when he meets his upstairs neighbor, Mimi, who makes artificial flowers, he falls in love, takes her out to a local café on Christmas eve and buys her a hat (*I’ve never understood how he can afford to do that*). She adores him instantly. Thanks in part to his best friend Marcello’s ex-lover Musetta the second act is a scream and all seems right with their off-to-one-side world, a Paris that resembles Greenwich Village in the 1960s.



The Company in Act Two; The Café Momus; Photo: Ken Howard

By Act Three, however, romance has grown a bit stale and Mimi and Rodolfo come to an understanding about their affair. He fears her illness which has worsened and wants to leave her before he faces an inevitable loss. This man is no hero, it appears, but he agrees to stay with her through the winter. The fourth and final act is set in the spring. Musetta has been caring for Mimi and announces her return to Rodolfo’s studio where she has come to die in the presence of the man she loves. Efforts to save her are fruitless. Tragedy ensues.



Whitney Morrison as Mimi, Yongzhao Yu as Rodolfo;
Photo: Ken Howard

The lush and beautiful voices of Yongzhao Yu and Whitney Morrison as the lovers brought tears to the eyes in this production. Their arias in act one as they meet and introduce themselves were done exquisitely. She has lost her room key and he has found it and hidden it. They are attracted and lost in the moment. These two performers seemed so very involved with each other that if they hadn't been compelled by his friends they might have had sex in his room right then and there. That's how beautiful their singing, and Brian Garman's orchestra made the moment.



Evan Lazdowski as Colline, Ethan Vincent as Schaunard, Yongzhao Yu as Rodolfo, Whitney Morrison as Mimi, Benjamin Taylor as Marcello, Veronique Filloux as Musetta;
Photo: Ken Howard

The entire company is wonderful and moment to moment the opera captured its audience and made hundreds of people thrill to the best of Puccini. Veronique Filloux was a delightful Musetta and her Act Two song and “dance” was both wonderfully sung and wonderfully comic. As her lover Marcello, Benjamin Taylor’s heroic baritone voice was a standout. Ethan Vincent and Evan Landowski were more than fine, they sang collegially and brought the characters’ camaraderie to the fore. Landowski as Colline sang a very moving rendition of the aria Vecchia Zimarra as he prepares to pawn his overcoat to buy medicine for Mimi.

Jonathan Loy directed a very busy company in a bright and airy production with small details attended to as closely as were the big moments in the story. He left the impression that we were visitors in Paris who happened to witness what goes on there in the Latin Quarter among the artistic residents.

Brian Garman conducted his thirty-three piece orchestra with all the detail and flair of a Metropolitan Opera orchestra. The Colonial Theatre was enlivened with glorious sounds..

Unfortunately for those of us at the rear of the theatre the surtitles were hard to read. Brooke Stanton’s costumes were just right and the sets designed by Stephen Dobay worked as well as they could (a technical glitch delayed the start of Act Three). I thought Alex Jainchill’s lighting was too dim, but others were pleased with it.

All in all, this is a wonderful production of one of the world’s great works and so very worth seeing. The theater was almost full, so if you have a desire to indulge in the high art of opera, don’t wait, book now.

+ 08/26.2023 +

La Boheme plays at the Colonial Theatre, 111 South Street in Pittsfield, MA for two more performances, August 29 and September 1. For information and tickets go to: BerkshireOperaFestival.org or call 413-997-4444.