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A Revitalized *Butterfly* Highlights Chas MacKay's Santa Fe Swan Song

August 8, 2018 | By [Thomas May](#), *Musical America*

SANTA FE—During the long reign of founder John Crosby, Santa Fe Opera cultivated its reputation as a “Strauss house.” Yet only three of the composer’s operas had been presented under the company’s third general director, Charles MacKay, before he decided to include a brand-new production of *Ariadne auf Naxos* as a key attraction of his farewell season.

Directed by Tim Albery and boasting a mostly vivid ensemble, this *Ariadne* (seen on August 1) works best in treating the *buffa* side of Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s curious, and curiously reworked, hybrid. The backstage travails suffered by the Composer (sung with radiant pathos by Amanda Majeski) naturally open up a rich range of potential commentary on the art—and business—of making art. Tobias Hoheisel’s costumes and sets play up the contrast between the worlds of the hectic, busy Prologue and the opera proper: In the former, a dreary hallway lined with dressing-room doors underscores the disdain with which the never-seen patron, the “richest man in Vienna,” treats the artists he commissions. The opera proper unfolds on a dimly lit, abstract set outlined by a large teardrop shape, Ariadne ensconced in a coffin-like pod that stands for her cave.



Albery also pitted the use of English translation (for the “real world” of the Prologue, including the *commedia dell’arte* performers) against the original German (for the “serious opera” involving Ariadne’s plight). But this scheme is not followed consistently and so fails to make a coherent point; both the Composer and Zerbinetta revert to German for their big numbers. In the spoken role of the Majordomo, Kevin Burdette injects a delicious note of Schadenfreude as Rod Gilfry’s Music Master attempts to take stock of the unexpected crisis. It marks one of many amusing touches in Albery’s staging.

Unfortunately, the opera itself feels anti-climactic after his stylish approach to the Prologue, resulting in a lopsided whole. As the grieving Ariadne, despite her imposing vocal resources, Amanda Echalaz lacked variety and passion, too often defaulting to a tedious sameness of phrasing (in contrast to her delightfully timed turn as the Prima Donna). Nor does Albery offer anything particularly engaging in the vaudeville-accented interactions between the comic troupe and Ariadne (with choreography by Jodi Melnick). Jarrett Ott sang an appealing Harlequin, and Liv Redpath’s Zerbinetta stole the show with her intricately varied “Grossmächtige Prinzessin.” Bruce Sledge brought a solid, weighty heldentenor to the punishing part of Bacchus.



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It is left for James Gaffigan and the marvelously pliant performance he drew from Strauss's reduced orchestra to depict the opera's great transformation where the staging falls short. Indeed, Gaffigan's grasp of this score's vast stylistic range and turn-on-a-dime transitions—from cabaret insouciance to Wagnerian paraphrase that is both parody and idolization of its model—stood out among the evening's pleasures.

Apart from Santa Fe Opera's powerful *Doctor Atomic* (reviewed [here](#)) and a new *Candide* to honor the Bernstein anniversary (which I was unable to see), this summer's other two productions are revivals of popular fare. Working from the late Edward Hastings's popular 2002 staging of *L'Italiana in Algeri*, director Shawna Lucey hammers away at the conviction that we're supposed to be having a giddy good time: relentlessly, to the point that the constant mugging, gesturing, jazz handing, etc. soon grow tiresome, only intensifying the formulaic repetitiveness of Rossini's score.



At the performance of August 3, the aftermath of the previous night's dramatic storm (during *Doctor Atomic*) knocked out the lighting system until the second act, so we missed out on Duane Schuler's opening design for the well-known pop-up storybook sets by Robert Innes Hopkins, which exaggerated the flatness of the characters. No real insight to illuminate the themes of Orientalism or gender politics comes through beyond an obvious, feel-good, "we're all the same at heart" sentimentality. As with the *Ariadne*, the emphasis was on comic preening, on the *buffa*, throughout.

Still, as the resourceful Isabella ("l'Italiana")—here represented as an aviatrix from the Amelia Earhart era—Daniela Mack exuded charisma and lively virtuosity across her impressive range, delivering a particularly memorable dressing scene. Scott Conner's comic timing as a clowning Mustafà was well-matched to the context (eliciting touches of a basso buffo Austin Powers), abetted by Craig Verm as his sidekick henchman Haly. Patrick Carfizzi combined excellent acting skills and mellifluous singing as Taddeo, whose somewhat perplexing role as Isabella's "guardian" is appended with a directorial happy ending. Company apprentice Stacey Geyer revealed an exquisite soprano as the Bey's hapless wife Elvira, while Jack Swanson was a genuine standout as Lindoro, unspooling the lead tenor's difficult coloratura with astonishing lightness, grace, and beautiful timbre. Aside from recurrent issues of coordination with the stage, Corrado Rovaris conducted with stylishly pacing and energy, above all in Rossini's brilliantly manic finales.

Following the disappointments of *L'Italiana*, Santa Fe's *Madama Butterfly* (performance of August 4) emerged with unexpected revelations that bring freshness to Puccini's overproduced work. Matthew Ozawa directs this revival of the late Lee Blakeley's staging from 2010, for which conductor John Fiore opted to present the Brescia version (the first the several revisions Puccini made to the score following the fiasco of the Milan premiere). The key differences make for a less sympathetic characterization of Pinkerton and a less "melodramatic" Cio-Cio-San, at the same time bringing the clash of cultures into greater relief. Fiore has stated that he regards the Brescia *Butterfly* as preferable since it combines Puccini's musical improvements with dramatic elements he later cut or smoothed over.



Ozawa uses gesture and body language to sensitively enhance the tragedy of cultural misunderstanding. Cio-Cio-San is not simply a victim but a boldly independent young woman who defies her family's traditions yet remains rooted in the world of her upbringing: she and her family (as assembled in the first act) conduct themselves with reserve and propriety, in contrast to the loose, aggrandizing movements of the Yankees.

Jean-Marc Puissant's sets and Rick Fisher's lighting (so lonely and alienating in the second act) poetically evoke *Butterfly*'s changing condition over the

course of the drama. In the second act, three years after her blissful, moon-drenched wedding night, telegraph poles have sprouted nearby the hillside house that Pinkerton quickly abandoned, a poignant commentary on the colonialist "opening" of Japan and Cio-Cio-San's longing for contact.

The excellent cast includes Joshua Guerrero as a subtler-than-usual Pinkerton. He doesn't shy away from highlighting the American interloper's racism and arrogance in the first scene. The long love duet—benefitting from Guerrero's burnished, ardent tenor—almost convinced that his ugly traits had been tamed by passion, with the interloper (and even of his women) to the first scene suggested a powerful transformation.

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Ana María Martínez projected a huge spectrum of emotions as Cio-Cio-San, her soprano similarly commanding a spectacular range of effects, of which her softly floated high notes were merely one example. The desperation of her final confrontation with Kate Pinkerton (Hannah Hagerty, in the more fully characterized Brescia role) grows almost unbearable. Megan Marino sang a movingly sympathetic Suzuki, and Nicholas Pallesen, despite his huge, authoritative voice as Sharpless, shrank impotently when confronted by Cio-Cio-San's stubborn optimism—an especially memorable touch. Matthew DiBattista (Scaramuccio in *Ariadne*) is not so much unctuous as plotting as the broker Goro, and Solomon Howard strikes fear all around as the cursing Bonze—an antipode to *Butterfly*'s other uncle, the happy-go-lucky Yakuside (Benjamin Taylor).

Fiore, an American conductor long based in Europe, showers loving attention on the luminous details of Puccini's score while highlighting the motifs that undergird and enhance the drama's structural coherence. His flexibly shaped tempi served to bring out the best from this fine cast. It is with this anything-but-routine production of a box office staple that Charles MacKay brings his decade-long tenure to its close.

Top: Bruce Sledge (Tenor/Bacchus) and Amanda Echalaz (Prima Donna/Ariadne)

Middle: Scott Conner (Mustafa) and Daniela Mack (Isabella) in *L'Italiana in Algeri*

Bottom: Kelly Kaduce as *Madama Butterfly*

Photos by Ken Howard for Santa Fe Opera



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