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REVIEWS

SFOpera Season Opens: Disorder in the Courts

October 2, 2026 | By Thomas May, Musical America

SAN FRANCISCO—*Simon Boccanegra* has always been a difficult opera to bring off. Even Verdi had to remake it, returning nearly a quarter-century after the unsuccessful 1857 premiere to revise it substantially with Arrigo Boito’s libretto. Chosen to open San Francisco Opera’s season, it met another inauspicious delay when the orchestra strike wiped out the first three performances. Once it finally reached the stage, however, Music Director Eun Sun Kim and an excellent cast generated a powerful dramatic sweep that carried the audience through the work’s convoluted story and made for a genuinely memorable evening.

The final score is a hybrid, preserving much of the 1857 opera while incorporating Verdi’s far-reaching 1881 revisions. Boccanegra’s rediscovery of his long-lost daughter carries more emotional weight than the conventional love plot, while Genoa’s struggle for power is charged by old grievances, vengeance, and the possibility of reconciliation. A roughly 25-year gap divides the Prologue from the main action, leaving productions to make a densely layered story legible without simplifying it.



Amartuvshin Enkhbat as Boccanegra, Eleonora Buratto as Amelia, Joshua Guerrero as Gabriele Adorno

Claus Guth’s 2006 Staatsoper Hamburg production, revived by Katherine M. Carter, approaches the opera through Boccanegra’s memory. At the threshold of death, the Doge watches his past unfold as a huge framed image upstage opens into a separate space for his recollections. Christian Schmidt’s skewed perspectives make the remembered scenes feel subtly off-kilter. The enormous meteor that descends farther with each act is less convincing. At the performance I attended (September 25), it provoked barely stifled laughter.

Kim’s work with the orchestra was remarkably accomplished, especially in the aftermath of the strike. She showed an acute feeling for Verdi’s melodic abundance, rhythmic language, and long, charged pauses. She drew striking depth from the score’s dark low colors, while flashes of piping piccolo and shrill upper-register sound cut abruptly through the gloom. Throughout, the playing remained fluid and responsive.

Now opening his third consecutive San Francisco Opera season in Verdi, Amartuvshin Enkhbat gave a richly dimensional performance in the title role. His baritone could unleash tremendous power, but he was just as compelling when he pulled the sound back, finding touching restraint and even delicacy. Christian Van Horn made a powerful impression as Fiesco, his resonant bass-baritone encompassing the character’s melancholy, desire for vengeance, and eventual capacity for reconciliation.

Amid this concentration of low male voices, Eleonora Buratto’s Amelia—the score’s sole principal female voice—stood out vividly, capable of considerable force but also of amber-toned low notes and moments of almost whispered beauty. Joshua Guerrero sang Gabriele Adorno with a strong, agile tenor, forcefully without strain, with his strongest dramatic moments coming in Gabriele’s outbursts of anger rather than the love scenes. Aleksey Bogdanov was an effectively sinister Paolo. The San Francisco Opera Chorus, under John Keene, was superb, giving the opera the scale that makes its atmosphere of civil conflict palpable.

Buratto’s presence as the lone woman amid an overwhelmingly male political world offered an apt bridge to Thea Musgrave’s *Mary, Queen of Scots* the next evening (September 26). With score and libretto by Musgrave, the 1977 opera focuses on the turbulent years following Mary Stuart’s return from France to Scotland in 1561, before her long English captivity under Elizabeth I.

A stage-managed queen

Musgrave has called the opera “the cornerstone of my operatic repertoire.” San Francisco’s co-production with English National Opera has particular historical resonance: SFO affiliate Spring Opera Theater presented it here

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in 1979, with Musgrave conducting, making her the first woman composer whose work was staged at the San Francisco Opera.

Heidi Stober is well-versed in the formidable title role, having sung it in the ENO's 2025 semi-staged concert performance by Stewart Laing. His contemporary-dress conception was carried over here, with a temporary marquee and metal barricades making a notably meager stand-in for the Palace of Holyroodhouse.

"I stand alone," Mary sings near the opera's center. The unusually large ensemble—13 principal roles plus chorus—gives her isolation an almost paradoxical force. Returning to Scotland as a Catholic queen amid Protestant ascendancy, Mary finds herself surrounded by men trying to stage-manage her, driven by ambition, vanity, or appetite for power. Laing's most effective image is the recurring crowd-control barrier across the stage. It makes Mary's predicament spatial: Long before her English captivity, the men around her are already trying to cordon off her authority, control access to her, and restrict the space in which she can act.



Thomas Kinch, Earl of Bothwell; Heidi Stober, Mary; Thomas Mole, James Stewart in SFO's *Mary, Queen of Scots*

Much else in the contemporary setting seemed theatrically undernourished. With parkas, knit caps, rain gear, and assorted modern dress supplying few visual clues, distinctions among nobles, clerics, courtiers, and populace blurred. The visual drabness sat uneasily beside the vitality of Musgrave's orchestral writing. By the third act the marquee has been stripped to its skeletal frame, but on the vast War Memorial Opera House stage it looked notably underscaled.

Musgrave sustains long stretches of psychological and political unease through misted string textures and isolated instrumental lines, sharpening crises with sudden fanfare-like chords and trilling figures. Early-music echoes and a madrigalian sensibility are woven into Musgrave's modern language as more than clever pastiche: They help define the courtly world even as the score's harsher textures expose the violence beneath it. Passages allowing the vocal line a degree of improvisatory freedom are an intriguing feature of Musgrave's treatment of speech. Italian conductor Clelia Cafiero, in her company debut, shaped this shifting dramatic canvas with considerable authority.

Stober met the role's punishing vocal demands with impressive stamina, negotiating its high-lying writing and wild intervallic leaps while carrying the doomed queen through a remarkable succession of emotional states. Her characterization was less persuasive, with fussy gestures and recurrent fretting that sometimes diminished Mary's stature.

Baritone Thomas Mole made James Stewart, Earl of Moray, a strangely mesmerizing presence, his forceful singing and chilling focus turning the character's poisonous ambition into something both fascinating and repellent. Yet despite the contrasting male voice types, Musgrave's writing for them tends to lack differentiation; much of their individuality here came from the performers themselves. Tenor Thomas Kinch made Bothwell a hulking, increasingly loathsome presence, culminating in a brutally staged sexual assault, while tenor Christopher Sokolowski caught Darnley's wounded vanity and narcissism. Baritone Hadleigh Adams brought a seductive magnetism to Riccio, particularly in his Orpheus song.

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