

'SUSANNAH' SHINES DESPITE GLITCHES CALIFORNIA OPERA ASSOCIATION'S DEBUT WAS A FLAWED GEM.

George Warren, SPECIAL TO THE BEE

Central California has a new opera company with big ideas and a good deal of community support. The California Opera Association made its debut this weekend with a performance of "Susannah," by American composer Carlisle Floyd. The performances took place at the Fresno Veterans Memorial Auditorium and featured soprano Renee Souza in the role of Susannah Polk, bass David Feiertag as the Rev. Olin Blitch, tenor Craig Gilmore as Little Bat, and tenor Steven Plummer as Sam Polk. Members of the Tulare County Symphony, students from California State University, Fresno, and others comprised the orchestra, directed by Roger Cantrell.

Souza played a convincing Susannah, a victim of her own innocence and the paranoia of religious leaders in her mid-20th century Tennessee community. She sang playfully in the beginning, before her tragedy began, and with increasing intensity as she acquired enemies and learned of her plight.

The score did not offer much to allow Souza to demonstrate her vocal skill. It remained largely in the safe zone and required some awkward shifts from low to high, attempting to increase the dramatic inflection of the music. Instead, it sounded as though the singer suddenly had to make a great effort to reach the high notes, and the new phrase contrasted with, rather than grew from, the preceding phrase.

Feiertag, singing the role of the visiting evangelist, sang with authority and just the right measure of irony to capture the hypocrisy of the religious leader. His voice and his demeanor commanded every scene in which he appeared. Even in dramatically weak moments, such as when he switched from a prophet of God to a pleading, lonely, lusting man, he maintained his demeanor and almost made the switch believable.

The comic relief lay in Gilmore's Little Bat. This character spent half the performance crouching under Susannah's front porch, hiding and watching the events transpire. When he had an opportunity to participate in a scene, he played a hyperactive, nearly insane young man, plagued with the conflict of admiration for, and fear of, Susannah. He sang with great strength and served as perhaps the most inspired element of the story.

Plummer, as Susannah's alcoholic brother with whom she lived, also sang his part well. While there was little chemistry between Souza and Plummer, together they created an atmosphere of tragedy appropriate to the story line.

The four soloists competently fulfilled their roles, but other elements failed to come together. Perhaps the greatest reason for this lies with the weaknesses of a youthful composer, who composed the opera when he was around 30. Opera features singers, and opera composers must, at all cost, provide their singers with great vocal music. Floyd composed some tuneful arias but did not provide any vocal music that approached virtuosity or allowed the singers to shine.

Most unfortunately, Feiertag's rich bass voice never had the chance to display its latent power.

Next, the orchestra not only played so loudly that it buried the singers. It played out of tune for nearly the entire show, and it played with little feel for the rhythm. One glaring example of the orchestra's shortcomings happened when the ensemble engaged in a country dance. This dance was like a hoedown, where the fiddler fiddles and stomps his feet while the dancers do-si-do and swing their partners. The solo violinist did not learn the part well and played with no sense of timing or style. Then the orchestra joined the soloist and limped through what should have been an exciting, rousing dance.

Finally, some of the supporting cast members sang relatively well, while others sang poorly. This hit-and-miss characteristic pervaded the entire production. Some costumes appeared genuine for the period, while others looked like modern-day casual attire. Some sections of the music sounded well rehearsed,

while others sounded like a first run-through. The soloists sang well but did not interact convincingly. When an event is billed as a production by a world-class opera star, featuring singers from New York and Los Angeles, one hopes that all of the details will combine for a first-class aesthetic experience.

Keep working, California Opera Association; you have a great vision.

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