

MUSIC REVIEW | CHELSEA OPERA

After 5 Years, a Tender Work Is Revisited

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

Published: June 5, 2009



Katie Orlinsky for The New York Times

Anya Fidelia and the Chelsea Opera performed "Suor Angelica" at St. Peter's Church.

With American [opera](#) companies large and small struggling financially and a few going under, there was a patch of encouraging news on Thursday night at St. Peter's Church in Chelsea, the home of the Chelsea Opera. This scrappy company celebrated its fifth anniversary with a production of Puccini's "Suor Angelica."

True, Puccini might not have recognized his orchestration as played here. Given the company's budget constrictions, the orchestra consisted of a piano and a small roster of strings and winds, ably conducted by Carmine Aufiero. Yet the committed cast included gifted singers. The soprano Anya Fidelia made a melancholic and earthy-voiced Angelica. If the production, by the experienced director Beth Greenberg, was bare-bones, the church setting was richly appropriate. The guileless spirituality of Puccini's tender one-act opera, which takes place in an Italian convent, came through. (The main roles are double-cast through this four-performance run.)

Before the performance, sung in Italian without supertitles, the founding co-directors, Lynne Hayden-Findlay and Leonarda Priore, spoke to the audience, which packed the church. In five seasons the Chelsea Opera has presented 10 productions, starting with this staging of "Suor Angelica." So it was a fitting gesture, if also affordable, to return to this beloved Puccini work.

"Suor Angelica" tells of a young woman from an aristocratic family who is forced to become a nun, having had a child though unmarried. The story is set in the garden of a convent. So it is a little jarring to see the nuns tending to plants, distributing provisions and chatting amiably in front of the altar at St. Peter's.

Yet when Angelica's severe aunt, La Zia Principessa, arrived for a rare visit, on formal business, seeing the confrontation played in a church lent a chilling dimension to the encounter. When Angelica was told that that her child, a boy, had taken

ill two years earlier and died, Ms. Fidelia sang the opera's pivotal aria, "Senza Mamma," almost as a religious entreaty, collapsing on the steps to the altar in anguish over the child who had never known his mother.

Ms. Fidelia faltered during the soft, high notes so essential to the hushed ending of this aria. Still, she put the role across in an intense and appealing performance. And the mezzo-soprano Dulce Manzini won bravos for her vocally and emotionally ominous Principessa.

The evening began with "Women Extraordinaire," an hourlong program of well-known arias and duets that presented diverse portraits of women, with some impressions of women by men tossed in. The excerpts, accompanied by the pianist Audrey Saint-Gil, allowed the Chelsea Opera to give young singers, including several from the chorus of nuns in "Suor Angelica," a chance for solo turns.

Unfortunately, several of the singers were simply not up to the vocal challenges. The highlight was a performance of the "Flower Duet" from Delibes's "Lakmé" by Casey Hutchinson and Kirsten Allegri. But the loyal Chelsea Opera audience gave warm applause to all the singers on this festive night.

The Chelsea Opera performs "Suor Angelica" on Saturday and Sunday at St. Peter's Church, 346 West 20th Street; (212) 260-1796, chelseaopera.org.

A version of this article appeared in print on June 6, 2009, on page C6 of the New York edition.