

Le Bon Journal

Reviews of opera, orchestra, competition, festivals, & premieres

REVIEW: *The Elixir of Love*, a one-off opera production by Maui Pops Orchestra and San Francisco Pocket Opera, Sunday 13 March 2011, Castle Theater, Maui

Producing an opera is one of the most expensive feats in classical music, for it requires soloists, choir (often), orchestra, costume, choreography, stage prop, and more. The singers don't just sing, they must also act or overact. Without economy of scale, one-off productions are even more expensive. These are only a few of the reasons why opera is so expensive. Some opera companies, particularly the touring kind, reduce their essentials to a minimum. In the extreme, an opera can be performed with just the singers and an accompanying instrument such as a piano or guitar.

When I first heard about the opera "**The Elixir of Love**" coming to Maui, I could scarcely believe it. What an ambitious endeavour to fly the singers from San Francisco to Maui, never mind paying members of the chorus and the orchestra in Maui! And to do all this just for one performance? There must be serious opera lovers in Maui beside myself, I concluded. Opera on Maui is extremely rare. In fact, I daresay, classical music performances are already rare on this island. Will opera lovers be flying from other islands to see this show?

Gaetano Donizetti's (1797 - 1848) famous comedy opera "**L'elisir d'amore**" also known as "*The Elixir of Love*" opened on Sunday 13th March 2011 afternoon at the Castle Theatre of the Maui Arts and Cultural Centre.

Cleverly translated into English by Donald Pippin, the founder and librettist of the San Francisco Pocket Opera, "**The Elixir of Love**" is a funny story about a magic love potion and a love triangle.

Sunday 13 March 2011's concert production of "*The Elixir of Love*" in Maui was a collaboration of the seven members of the San Francisco Pocket Opera (the narrator Donald Pippin, 5 soloists, and the executive director Dianna Shuster), the expanded 22-member opera ensemble of Olinda Chorale and Friends, and the Maui Pops Orchestra conducted by James Durham. All the soloists and most members of the chorus were dressed in period costume, acting with stage props but no stage set. The rest of the chorus sat on the main stage with the orchestra behind the actors.

Whereas Elton John's concert sold out within 2 days to warrant a second concert in February 2011, the 1,200-seat Castle Theatre was far from full for the opera. Earlier in the week of Elton John's concert, Hawaiian Youth Symphony's concert with local talent Uncle Willie K was nearly full, with free entry. Tickets for Elton John ranged from \$25 to nearly \$300. In contrast, the opera was far more affordable, tickets from \$15 to \$55 each.

Why a one-off production? It was difficult to fill 1,200 seats.

Not that *L'elisir d'Amore* is not a famous opera. The aria "*Una Furtiva Lagrima*" (a furtive tear) is perhaps one of the most famous bel canto arias of all time. Every world-famous tenor has sung it: Domingo, Pavarotti, Carreras, Bocelli, and Caruso. Even sopranos like Izzy and violinists like Joshua Bell have taken the heart-wrenching melody as their own. I heard it long before I knew it came from Donizetti's opera. After attending the opera, I listened to every single version of "*Una Furtiva Lagrima*" on youtube. It is THAT addictive.

Lee Strawn's performance as Doctor Dulcamara was excellent. He was the perfect quick-get-away con artist. But it was the

peasant Nemorino played by Charles Michael Belle that we were most sympathetic for, particularly when he sang "Una Furtiva Lagrima." Was it deliberate that Belle shaved his head for this role? He could tear his hair out, he cries. Baritone Jason Sarten as Sergeant Belcore immediately pries of his bald despair. This was just one of the clever translations that caught my attention.

Not all talented artists get the lead roles. Mezzo soprano Megan Stetson gave a convincing performance of the tall young village woman Giannetta who vied for the affections of Belcore and Nemorino, leading the other peasant girls in gossip and romance.

I found a video clip of another performance of soprano Heidi Moss as the heroine Adina singing in original Italian. I look forward to the English version online one day, especially the duos and trios which display Donizetti's beautiful harmonies and creative juxtaposition of different (and often contrasting) emotions of the soloists. We see how Adina wants Nemorino to love her while he fears that she would make the mistake of marrying Belcore in haste. In another scene, we see the love triangle of Adina, Nemorino, and Belcore unfold.

I recognised fellow Rotarian and tenor Paul Janes Brown initially as one of the peasants and later as the notary summoned to marry Adina and Belcore. Doubling up is another way to manage the economics of an opera production.

Unlike in London and Amsterdam, where I hardly ever meet anyone I know at the opera, I was pleasantly surprised to count around 5 people I've met before. Although I did not stay for the gala dinner that followed, I thought it was a most enjoyable afternoon, definitely something I would offer discounts

to the 4,000 students of Maui College across the street (in the future).

Relevant websites

- Maui Pops Orchestra
<http://www.maui pops.org>
- San Francisco Pocket Opera
<http://www.pocketopera.org>
- Olinda Chorale and Friends
<http://www.the-olinda-chorale.org>
- Maui Arts and Cultural Centre
<http://www.mauiarts.org>
- Le Bon Journal
<http://www.bonjournal.com>
- Concert Blog
<http://concertblog.wordpress.com>

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<http://concertblog.wordpress.com/2011/03/15/opera-maui/>

About Le Bon Journal

Founded in 2001, Bon Journal began as a continuation of a 365-day online diary, with selections compiled into thematic newsletters and e-zines, eventually evolving into a permanent collection of personal reviews of opera, music competitions and festivals, largely to share the concert-going experience with a broader audience.