

Iris, Sex Slave, Precursor to Cio-Cio San in Many Ways

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ANNANDALE-on-HUDSON, N.Y.—We'll never know where Italian opera might have gone artistically after the supreme achievement of Verdi's final operas. For the sentimental, theatrically savvy, frankly accessible operas of Puccini soon moved in to gain the upper hand.

As Bard SummerScape prepares for the August 5 launch of "Puccini and His World," its annual in-depth investigation of a single composer, the "and His World" preamble may well prove more rewarding than the over exposed works of the composer himself.

That is the expectation aroused by the revelatory production of Mascagni's *Iris* on July 22, the first of five performances running through July 31 at the Richard B. Fisher Center on the Bard campus. And it's not simply that Mascagni was a colleague and even sometime roommate of Puccini; by treating a Japanese subject, *Iris*, first seen in Rome in 1898, prefigures *Madama Butterfly* by six years.



Talise Trevigne, soprano, *Iris*
Bard SummerScape Production of *Iris*, July 22 – 31, 2016
Composed by Pietro Mascagni; Libretto by Luigi Illica | Directed by James Darrah
American Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Leon Botstein, music director
The Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College | Sosnoff Theater
Fishercenter.bard.edu | 845-758-7900 | Photo by Cory Weaver

Talise Trevigne as Iris

The two operas even have a common librettist in Luigi Illica. Puccini engaged Giuseppe Giacosa to work with Illica on *Butterfly*, apparently to moderate Illica's penchant for excess. But the lurid decadence of *Iris's* Oriental setting is central to the fascination of a work far less conventional than Puccini's, with its clash of cultures and pathetic, abandoned heroine.

Iris doesn't even have a love interest—the wealthy young Osaka's obsession with the childlike title character, who is kidnapped into sex slavery to satisfy his sexual urges, hardly qualifies as that. When Osaka loses interest in her after she resists his advances, the brothel owner Kyoto decides to sell her in the sex market, where she is discovered by her blind father. Unaware of the facts and assuming the worst, he rashly curses her, whereupon she commits suicide by leaping into the sewers of Tokyo.

This might seem like a standard verismo plot, but Illica imaginatively wove elements of *Japanoiserie* into the fabric of his libretto that help make *Iris* an exotic, fantastical, even dreamlike work. The resplendent choral "Hymn to the Sun," which opens the opera and recurs in the apocalyptic final scene, is but one such element that lifts *Iris* above everyday realism. And acquaintance with Mascagni's colorful, engrossing score should put an end to talk of his being the composer of just one opera that matters, *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

Avoiding pseudo-Oriental themes, Mascagni evokes the East through such means as the use of Japanese instruments and the whole-tone scale. His harmonies are often extremely chromatic, yet both they and his essentially through-composed style allow room for effusions of rich, Italianate melody. His dramatic assurance makes *Iris* in James Darrah's production—with sets by Emily Anne MacDonald and Cameron Jaye Mock, costumes by Peabody Southwell, and lighting by Neil Peter Jampolis—a riveting experience.

Not that the production doesn't have flaws. Act 1 is disappointingly colorless for a text that mentions many types of flowers, but the Act 2 brothel scene has some good touches, as when Iris watches prostitutes applying their makeup while they look out towards the audience as if gazing into mirrors. Most memorable of all is the hazy, at first almost imperceptible depiction of a female falling in slow motion during the orchestral introduction to Act 3, an image that effectively establishes that act not as an extended death scene for the heroine but as an expression of her soul from beyond the grave.

Talise Trevigne's superlative performance as Iris—splendid in its range of vocal colors and captivating in its dramatic thrust—was an essential component of the evening's success. Gerard Schneider sang Osaka in a beefy tenor that had power but lacked resonance, and Douglas Williams, as Kyoto, had some good moments when singing from the stage floor rather than the acoustically disadvantageous upper level of the Act 1 set. Matthew Boehler sang strongly as Iris's father, Il Cielo, but why would an elderly Japanese have a rosary? An homage to Ponchielli's *La Cieca* in *La Gioconda*, perhaps? Cecilia Hall was excellent as a Geisha, not least in projecting music she is called upon to hum. Leon Botstein conducted as if he believed in the score and drew fine playing from the American Symphony Orchestra.