
REVIEWS

Opera, Live and In-Person in Palm Beach. Part 1

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. – After almost a year of not experiencing opera live and in person because of the coronavirus pandemic, to hear stars like Michael Fabiano, Latonia Moore, and Isabel Leonard in a semi-staged concert of *La Bohème* was like a dream come true. Not only were the singers world-class, but the open-air setting at the iTHINK Financial Amphitheater was refreshing on a balmy night in Florida when much of the U.S. was buried in snow.



iTHINK Financial Amphitheater, site of the Palm Beach Opera Festival

It was also kind of surreal, since the amphitheater is much more accustomed to hosting pop and rock acts than opera. The last performance before the pandemic shut down the facility in March 2020 was the Rib Round Up, a show that drew more than 20,000 fans of barbecued ribs and country music. When regular performances are scheduled to resume there next summer, the lineup includes the Backstreet Boys, the Dave Matthews Band, Megadeath, Alanis Morissette, and Santana.

But on Feb. 19, *La Bohème* graced the stage, the opening of Palm Beach Opera's outdoor festival, to be followed by *The Magic Flute* and *Pagliacci* – each also with top-flight casts – playing in repertory through February 27.



"We felt we *had* to do something to perform live," General Director David Walker said in an interview. "I am most proud of two things. We pivoted our entire season to figure out how to do an outdoor festival, which we've never done before. And we have become incredible public health safety experts, something we never knew we would need to do."

PBO, which celebrates its 60th anniversary next season, normally performs at the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts, but Covid closed the center, forcing the company to cancel everything it had planned there. After several months of searching for an outdoor facility, PBO landed on the amphitheater, located on the South Florida Fairgrounds, and the board of directors decided in August to go ahead with the festival.

The theater is a covered, open-sided structure, ringed by tall palm trees that sway in the breeze. The venue has 6,000 fixed seats for ticketholders and can accommodate thousands more on a hillside lawn, but in practicing health and safety protocols, the festival is limiting attendance to no more than 25 percent of capacity, with tickets priced from \$20 to \$100. Opening night had an audience of about 600.

Sanitizing of surfaces was done constantly by amphitheater employees, as well as the opera's stagehands, and masks were mandatory for everyone. Nevertheless, quite a few audience members were not wearing them at *La Bohème*. Palm Beach County, home of Mar-a-Lago, is Trump country.

Michael Fabiano was Rodolfo and Latonia Moore sang Mimì, and their relationship developed beautifully over the course of Puccini's high-wire act of an opera. With his clarity of tone and high-spirited persona, the tenor was an appealing poet whose gift for conversational singing served to enhance Rodolfo's grand, soaring moments, as when he declares to Mimì that he is poor but happy in "Che gelida manina!" Moore was a girlish, timid seamstress, at least at first in her fateful encounter over an unlit candle, but the soprano blossomed in the tender duet with "O soave fanciulla," and her performance went from strength to strength the rest of the evening. A highlight was her powerful, unerring rendering of "Donde lieta usci al tuo grido d'amore" in which Mimì lists her meager, precious possessions. The four-act opera was compressed into two acts, with a long intermission.



Isabel Leonard made her role debut as Musetta, and she was sensational. As the gold digger *par excellence* of Paris, the mezzo-soprano was the epitome of glamour in a glitzy gown, dashing off her famous Waltz with an irresistible mix of vocal virtuosity and theatrical wit. Quinn Kelsey was a delightfully earthy Marcello, and Ryan Speedo Green delivered Colline's Coat Aria with solemn gravity.



David Stern conducted the orchestra of about 35 players and the chorus of 24. He brought admirable restraint, which was no small feat under the circumstances, with his forces distanced and wearing masks, except, for choristers and wind players, when they performed. The amplified sound design by Paul Bevan was excellent, and five video cameras captured performance and projected it onto a screen above the stage.

All three festival operas were directed by James Robinson, and he deployed a deft touch in *La Bohème*, which was tricky given the distancing that had to be maintained in the rambunctious, matey scenes that the Bohemians have. The stage floor was taped with a grid of four-foot squares, which the director and stage managers used in blocking the singers' movement to keep good spacing. Robinson, artistic director of Opera Theatre of St. Louis, has become the go-to guy for staging Covid-era outdoor opera, having also directed [Tulsa Opera's Rigoletto](#) in a baseball stadium in October.

In many ways, it was a pleasure to dispense with all the usual stage business of an opera, such as the Café Momus number in *La Bohème*, and simply focus on the glorious music. There was a palpable feeling of joy in the performance--most of the musicians on stage have had little or no opportunity to perform for a live audience since the pandemic set in.

Part 2 of Fleming's coverage will be posted later this week.

Pictured, from the top: Latonia Moore as Mimì, Michael Fabiano as Rodolfo, Isabel Leonard as Musetta