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An Excellent Performance

*Gounod's 'Romeo and Juliet' at San Diego Opera,
enjoyed by MARLA NOCKIN*

Composer Charles Gounod, who lived from 1818 to 1893, is best known for his *Ave Maria* and two of his operas. Born in Paris, he was the son of a painter who had won the prestigious Prix de Rome for art in 1783. Charles, also a gifted painter, won the prize for music in 1839 and used his time in Italy to study sacred works of the sixteenth century. Only in 1855 did he achieve a degree of fame with the première of his *Saint Cecilia Mass*. His first opera, *Sappho*, was written as a vehicle for Pauline Viardot-Garcia. It was presented at the Paris Opéra in 1851 but never became popular. Four years later, however, he had a major success with *Faust*. Several works followed that did not hold the stage for very long.



Ailyn Pérez as Juliet and Stephen Costello as Romeo in San Diego Opera's 'Romeo and Juliet'. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

Then came *Romeo and Juliet* with a libretto that writers Jules Barbier and Michel Carré based on the Shakespeare tragedy. It was première at the Théâtre-Lyrique Impérial de Châtelet in Paris in 1867 and it soon became Gounod's second most popular work. In 1873, it was accepted as part of the repertory at the Opéra Comique where it was performed almost four hundred times during the next fourteen years.



Ailyn Pérez as Juliet in San Diego Opera's 'Romeo and Juliet'. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

On 16 March 2010, San Diego Opera presented *Romeo and Juliet* in a production by Cynthia Stokes that was originally designed for the Utah Opera. The solid looking two-story set by Eric Fielding was quite functional and helped to tell the story effectively. Susan Memmott-Allred's colorful costumes were accurate for the period, even down to the laced up closures.



Ailyn Pérez as Juliet and Stephen Costello as Romeo in San Diego Opera's 'Romeo and Juliet'. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

Choreographer Keturah Stickann devised delightful dances that showed the ability of San Diego Opera's excellent *corps de ballet*. There is considerable swordplay in this opera and fight director Dale Girard made it look real.



**Ailyn Pérez as Juliet in San Diego Opera's
'Romeo and Juliet'. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard**

Under the direction of Timothy Todd Simmons, the chorus sang as a harmonious whole while acting as individuals who sided with either the Capulets or the Montagues.



**Ailyn Pérez as Juliet and Stephen Costello as Romeo in San Diego Opera's 'Romeo and Juliet'.
Photo © 2010 Ken Howard**

The stars of this performance were Stephen Costello and his real life bride, Ailyn Pérez. Both are absolutely gorgeous to watch on stage. He is tall and lanky while she is petite and graceful. Best of all, both are finesingers.



Ailyn Pérez as Juliet in San Diego Opera's 'Romeo and Juliet'. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

Her lilting 'Waltz Song' was sung with exquisite phrasing and great beauty of tone. Costello has a variety of colors in his lyric voice and he uses them for dramatic flair. His tonal quality is sensuous and robust but the very highest notes in this opera did not come easily to him.



David Adam Moore as Mercutio and Stephen Costello as Romeo, with the Mercutio clan, in San Diego Opera's 'Romeo and Juliet'. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

David Adam Moore was an energetic and charismatic Mercutio who sang with a ringing, solid sound. Malcolm Mackenzie was a dramatically alert Gregorio. As Stephano, Sarah Castle rendered a tuneful aria and topped it off with a perfect trill.



Sarah Castle as the page Stephano in San Diego Opera's 'Romeo and Juliet'. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

Susanna Guzmán portrayed Gertrude as an elderly woman and sang with plaintive tones. As the Duke of Verona and Friar John, bass-baritone Philip Skinner flooded the auditorium with depth of tone while bass Kevin Langan was a committed and secure Friar Lawrence.



Friar Laurence (Kevin Langan) weds Juliet (Ailyn Pérez) Romeo (Stephen Costello) in San Diego Opera's 'Romeo and Juliet'. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

Joel Sorenson was a contentious Tybalt, Paul Hindemith a low-keyed Paris and Joseph Hu a stylish Benvolio. As Count Capulet, Juliet's father, bass-baritone Scott Sikon was a self-satisfied medieval nobleman whose singing had considerable emotional impact.



The Capulets' Ball in Gounod's 'Romeo and Juliet' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Ken Howard

Conductor Karen Keltner galvanized the orchestra into a romantic fervor and her incisive rhythms kept the audience enthralled. A French music specialist, she was in tiptop form here. This was an excellent performance of a fairly unusual opera that should remain in the memory of San Diego operagoers for some time to come.

Copyright © 19 March 2010 **Maria Nockin**,
Arizona USA

In 'Encouraging Others', Maria Nockin interviewed Ailyn Pérez and Stephen Costello earlier this month for Music & Vision. There are two further performances of Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* at San Diego Opera - on Friday 19 and Sunday 21 March 2010. The company's 2010 season finishes with Verdi's *La traviata* (Saturday 17, Tuesday 20, Friday 23 and Sunday 25 April). Further information from www.sdopera.com or +1 619 533 7000.

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