



Georges Bizet
San Diego Opera: Les pêcheurs de perles (The Pearl Fishers)

English text

 **La locandina**

Data dello spettacolo:
 03/05/2008

Nadir Charles Castronovo

Léila Ekaterina Siurina

Zurga Malcolm MacKenzie

Nourabad José Gallisa

Scenic and Costume Designer Zandra Rhodes

Lighting Director Ron Vodicka

Director Andrew Sinclair

Conductor Karen Keltner

 **La recensione**



Charles Castronovo (Nadir)
 Photo © Ken Howard, 2008

A truly well-made dish contains a mix of seasonings combined in such a way that no one component dominates and the result is a sublimely pleasing blend of flavors. San Diego Opera has presented just such a treat in its final production of the 2008 season, giving us Georges Bizet's *Pearl Fishers*, a succulent delight that rewards with a palette of glorious melodies, lovely singing, and rich settings that effectively immerse the audience into the mystery and enchantment of a far-away land.

Zandra Rhodes designed sets and costumes that created a multi-layered realm to captivate the eye, stir the heart, and transport the audience to an exotic island drenched in Eastern spirituality. Although there were many, many shades of colors, textures and shapes used together, the effect was a perfect mixture that encompassed the complexities of a polytheistic culture distant in both time and place to Western audiences. Rhodes put forth a vast array of visual images and yet balanced them, so the effect was both complex and harmonious – wonderful. The lighting, designed by Ron Vodicka, worked beautifully to showcase the action and the environment, even engaging the audience as lightning flashes pulsed through the theater during the storm that arose when the villagers discovered the illicit liaison of Léila and Nadir.



José Gallisa (Nourabad)
 Ekaterina Siurina (Leila)
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Pearl Fishers has often been criticized for lacking sufficient completeness in its plot to be considered satisfying drama. On one hand, one can easily recognize many of the elements common to better-known operas – forbidden love, jealousy over power and lovers, cultural pressures for conformity, and sacrifices made to protect a loved one. On the other hand, the libretto leaves certain gaps that make the story somewhat incomplete, but this production structured the action to amplify underlying tensions among the characters and thereby fill in information to give the audience a fuller experience of the drama. Credit goes to Andrew Sinclair's direction for positioning the characters in such a way that their often unspoken motivations became apparent to the audience. For example the high priest Nourabad, who has so little to say in this piece, still manages to make his jealous feelings known by scowling fiercely and angrily striding away when he sees that Zurga has been elected leader of the people instead of him.



The opera's setting is the island of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) off the southeast coast of India. The people are simple fishermen and devout followers of Hinduism. They worship Brahma as the god of creation who has the power to deliver a bountiful harvest to their village, and indeed, control

Ekaterina Siurina (Léila)
Photo © Ken Howard, 2008



Ekaterina Siurina (Léila)
and Charles Castronovo
(Nadir)
Photo © Ken Howard, 2008

whether they live or die. To ensure the good will of Brahma, they have engaged the services of a priestess to be, in effect, their "holy ambassador," and she promises to pray for them and maintain her vows of chastity and spiritual purity. When she reunites with a man whom she loves, the very security of the village is threatened and they urgently demand her death as punishment to atone for the sins she brought upon herself and the village she represents.

Russian soprano Ekaterina Siurina made her SDO debut as Léila, the woman who embodies first the hope and then the desperation of the pearl fishers' village. Siurina enthusiastically delivered the spirited power and excited infatuation of Léila as a woman who wants to live up to her commitments as a priestess but is unable to deny her earthly love for Nadir. Her voice was clear and strong, with genuine sweetness when describing her feelings for Nadir. A minor adjustment could be to soften her commanding sound somewhat in her high notes in order to more convincingly portray her spiritual devotion in the prayer aria of Act I. Her chemistry with Nadir was undeniable, however. She was clearly overwhelmed with joy at his return to her life and every bit of her actions and voice shone with that love. In addition, her courage was evident as she held her ground in the face of Zurga's violent jealousy, showing Léila to be a woman of deep strength as well as passion.

Charles Castronovo, an American tenor in his SDO debut, portrayed Nadir with chest-baring masculinity. He has a richly layered tone to his voice and produces it easily. His "Je crois entendre encore" at the end of Act I was beautifully done and he kept it light, moving smoothly, although it could have used a little more chest voice to enrich his high notes. Castronovo portrayed Nadir with a relaxed and genuine rapport in his interactions with both Léila and Zurga that was most credible.

Village Chief Zurga, delivered with wonderfully focused resonance and clarity of tone by American baritone Malcolm Mackenzie, undergoes several intense emotional swings in and out of jealousy, love, anger, remorse, and self-sacrifice. The famous duet in Act I, "Au fond du temple saint," tells of the renewed affection and trust between old friends Nadir and Zurga, and was delightfully crafted by Castronovo and Mackenzie. Later, Zurga learns of the betrayal of the vow he and Nadir made to avoid Léila and orders that they both be put to death. As Act III begins, Zurga regrets his actions, "L'orage s'est calmé," an aria that Mackenzie delivered with true grace. When Zurga finally recognizes Léila as the same young girl who hid him and saved his life years ago when he was in trouble, he recommits to saving her life and sacrificing himself to the wrath of Nourabad and the villagers. Mackenzie's acting was convincing throughout, and he had the best French enunciation.

José Gallisa gave the high priest Nourabad all the shadings the action allowed. His sonorous bass voice worked well to deliver the built-up frustration and distress Nourabad endures, and he made the most of opportunities to exert his character's authority. The chorus and dancing scenes weave in and out of this opera, so that one hardly notices them as separate, but rather as integral parts of the story that greatly enrich and support the experiences of the lead characters. John Malaschock's choreography was a pleasing mix of modern, classical, and athletic moves that were charming and exhilarating.

Karen Keltner masterfully led the orchestra, keeping everything in balance. Under her direction, the orchestra avoided overwhelming the singers while allowing the magnificent melodies to shine. All the best elements came

together in creating an intensely satisfying experience – wonderful all-around singing, entrancing stage design, stimulating dancing, and acting that had just the right intensity – to make this *Pearl Fishers* a highlight of the SDO season.

Olga Hirsch

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