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A well-balanced Butterfly

Soprano Capalbo plumbs the depths of deep character

By CHARLES WARD

In Canadian soprano Michele Capalbo, it had a special singer who knew how to handle the complex sides of the title role, Cio-Cio-San: a girl of exquisite physical grace and a woman of steely conviction.

Her singing certainly was bold, but the depth of her characterization as the ill-fated geisha known as Butterfly made a far bigger impression.

HGO was back at the Hermann Park facility on Friday for the "umpteenth" free performance, as company general director David Gockley quirkily described the evening in his introductory remarks. It was, however, the first presentation of a full-length opera since the disastrous evening in 2001 when Tropical Storm Alison washed out the opera's show.

Standard operas draw the crowds to Miller and Puccini's tragedy is certainly one of the most successful. Its soaring melodies still thrill and the tragedy of a 15-year-old geisha who believes she is married to a U.S. lieutenant never fails to at least moisten the eyes.

Guided by the conducting of Richard Bado, head of HGO's music staff, the cast of young singers certainly got into the essence of the characters.

Singing with a touch of histrionics, HGO Studio tenor Arturo Chacón-Cruz made sure we didn't miss the sob-wracked guilt of the cad Pinkerton, who is paralyzed when he should be strong. Returning to Nagasaki to take away his and Cio-Cio-San's son for safe rearing in the United States by his new American wife, Pinkerton can't stand the pressure of seeing Cio-Cio-San's demise and runs away. Chacón-Cruz sang with passion, good strength in his high notes and appealing tone (if the amplification didn't lie).

Studio baritone Joshua Hopkins was more suave and perceptive as the consul Sharpless, who tries to warn Pinkerton about having a fling with the geisha and then must take care of the trouble he left behind. Hopkin's singing was smooth, elegant and flecked with the pricks of consciousness that a man of honor feels.

But Capalbo offered a complexity of character that the others didn't (in part because Puccini balances the characters that way).

Her Cio-Cio-San was a mixture of the girlish geisha and the very mature woman who deliberately chooses a course — marriage to an American and conversion to his religion— that will make her an outcast.

Capalbo suggested the first with refined, graceful gestures. They loosened as Cio-Cio-San settled into her role as (abandoned) wife and mother. That refinement returned as psychological protection when Cio-Cio-San finally perceived her fate.

Other studio members took key secondary roles: tenor Nicholas Phan as the wily, oily marriage broker Goro; baritone Daniel Cilli in the appealing, if lanky-sounding, dual roles of the Imperial Commissioner and Prince Yamadori (a suitor of Butterfly); and mezzo soprano Jennifer Root as Suzuki with a loose focus of sound.

The production was simple. The set comprised a wide ramp tilted toward the audience and two narrower ones leading toward the wings. A few simple props suggested the two cultures driving the story.

A large screen behind the playing area showed an endless parade of flowers, butterflies, nature shots and travelogue photos to set the scene. (At intermission, HGO also used the screen to sneak in a couple of short commercials for a sponsor. Is this about to show up in the Wortham Theater Center?)

Bado and the orchestra were onstage behind the singers. His leadership thrived when the music moved and intensified; it lost some zing in slow passages where conductor and musicians must forcibly make the music move forward.

The amplification suggested that the orchestra played very well, but the engineers ladled on so much artificial reverberation that singers and orchestra became aural mush at peak volumes. Elsewhere, the quality suggested cheesy studio sound.

Overall, the production was simple and unpretentious, but the ability of singers, conductor and orchestra to get so compellingly to the core of the emotions showed that all the grand folderol of lavish productions isn't needed when the music-making is good.