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Review: In 'La Bohème,' Young Singers Embrace the Roles of Puccini's Free Spirits

By [ANTHONY TOMMASINI](#) JULY 8, 2016

Four young men share a garret in Paris: a struggling writer who fancies himself a poet; a frustrated artist who humbles himself painting lame murals in a remote tavern; a sort of café philosopher with scant employment options; and a versatile musician who manages to pick up a gig now and then, including a strange one from an eccentric nobleman.



Jessica Sandidge and Dangelo Diaz in "La Bohème" at the Kaye Playhouse. Credit Jen Joyce Davis

These are the roommates we meet in Puccini's "La Bohème." And since the 1896 premiere of this timeless opera, young people — especially young people in the arts — have seen themselves in the story and identified with these bohemian characters.

It's happening again at the Kaye Playhouse, where on Thursday night, a cast of gifted, eager young singers, mostly taking on these touchstone roles for the first time, performed in a simple, traditional but touching production presented by the Martina Arroyo Foundation. In retirement, Ms. Arroyo, the beloved American soprano, has fostered the careers of singers through her foundation.

This "Bohème" and a staging of "Die Fledermaus" this weekend are offered through the foundation's Prelude to Performance program. For six weeks, partic-

ipating singers received coaching in everything from character development to stage combat.

My guess is that it didn't take too much work to help these young singers understand Puccini's characters, especially Jessica Sandidge, who brings a melting soprano voice and vulnerability to Mimi, the winsome seamstress stricken with tuberculosis, and Dangelo Diaz, a Peruvian tenor whose smoky colorings and ardency were well suited to Rodolfo, the poet. The two lovers fall for each other during the most convincing love-at-first-sight scene in all of opera.

From one perspective, of course, these roles present enormous vocal challenges and demand mature, great voices. Yet fledgling singers can bring rejuvenating freshness and disarming sincerity to an opera that is surely presented in major houses too often for its own good. Puccini's bohemians are plucky characters. The guys share not only the garret, but also clothes and food and whatever money anyone comes into. Even in poverty, they carouse at their place and crack endless bad puns.

This cast (with Jeff Byrnes, as Marcello the painter; Chunfeng Li, as Colline the philosopher; and Jose Rubio, as Schaunard the musician) enacted these scenes with boisterous energy and charm. Claire Coolen makes a coquettish, bright-voiced Musetta, a singer and Marcello's on-again-off-again girlfriend.

The deeper message of "La Bohème," as profound as ever, also came through at the Kaye Playhouse. It's fine to be cavalier and penniless when you're healthy. But terminal illness is an adult problem demanding mature action. Though Rodolfo adores Mimi, when he realizes that she is gravely ill, he can't hack it. He foments a breakup. Mimi understands what's really going on.

The "Prelude to Performance" program opted for an old-fashioned staging. Directed effectively by Ian Campbell, the blocking and antics could fit almost unchanged into any traditional production of "La Bohème," though the individual singers bring nice personal touches to their roles. It could have been more revealing to see them in an updated concept, where they might have looked a bit less actorly. Still, with Willie Anthony Waters conducting, and a fresh-faced, fresh-voiced cast, this "La Bohème" delivered.