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LSO, Bach Chorale perform exhilarating opera

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Opera lovers in Greater Lafayette usually have to drive to Indianapolis, Bloomington or Chicago in order to indulge their passion. However, the Bach Chorale Singers and the Lafayette Symphony Orchestra brought the opera to the city. With the help of five exquisite solo singers, the slings and arrows of "Cavalleria Rusticana," Mascagni's melodramatic story came to Long Center and, the results were exhilarating.

It stands to reason when there are two strong conductors at work on the same project, the final product can be either dramatic or disappointing depending on their compatibility. In this case, nothing but the very best came to fruition. With Nicholas Palmer on the podium and William Jon Gray preparing the singers, everything went right. The roaring applause and the standing ovation attested to the success.

The libretto of "Cav" is one which probably has served as a model for untold numbers of soap operas over the last century. It's all there -- the dramatic love story, the betrayal, the accusations and the final violent end. The only thing missing was the Tide soap commercials. Only in this case it was done with musical finesse and minimal staging.

First, the chorus of "townsfolk" -- also known as the Bach Chorale. The sound was totally different from what we have become accustomed to. Instead of the carefully blended voices and the dynamics the BCS is known for, they were given their lead to "sing out with gusto." Opera choruses are not known for their quiet Easter hymn-like singing, but they were thrilling.

And then there were the solo characters. Singing the role of Santuzza, the lead lass who is wronged by her perfidious lover, was soprano Marci Wagnon. A gorgeous lyric soprano whose every note was in line with the legato Itaria "Voi lo sapete, Mamma." Although the passionate performance was only minimally staged, her acting ability was intense.

The role of Turiddu, the two-timing cad who so merrily spread his seed around town, was a young contender to the roles so often taken by Jose Carreras in the professional tenor world. At only 25 years old, he displayed a clear ringing range, holding his own with the various duets he was asked to perform. He was especially thrilling in his final aria to "Mamma Quel vino e generoso" with bursts of passion before his life ends at the point of Alfio's blade.

Baritone Aleksy Bogdanov's role as the blustery Alfio was perfect as the man who was also done wrong along with Santuzza and Turiddu. With the help of his witchy wife, Lola, they manage to mess up the lives of a lot of people. Lola was the perfect foil, beautifully sung by Mezzo-soprano Lindsay Ammann. Mamma Lucia, Turiddu's mother who also runs a tavern, was beautifully offered by contralto Charis Peden.

What more could one ask when opera is done in a firm, fast-paced manner by folks who really know what they're doing?

It was all there (minus the staging), and Lafayette is richer for it.