

San Diego Story

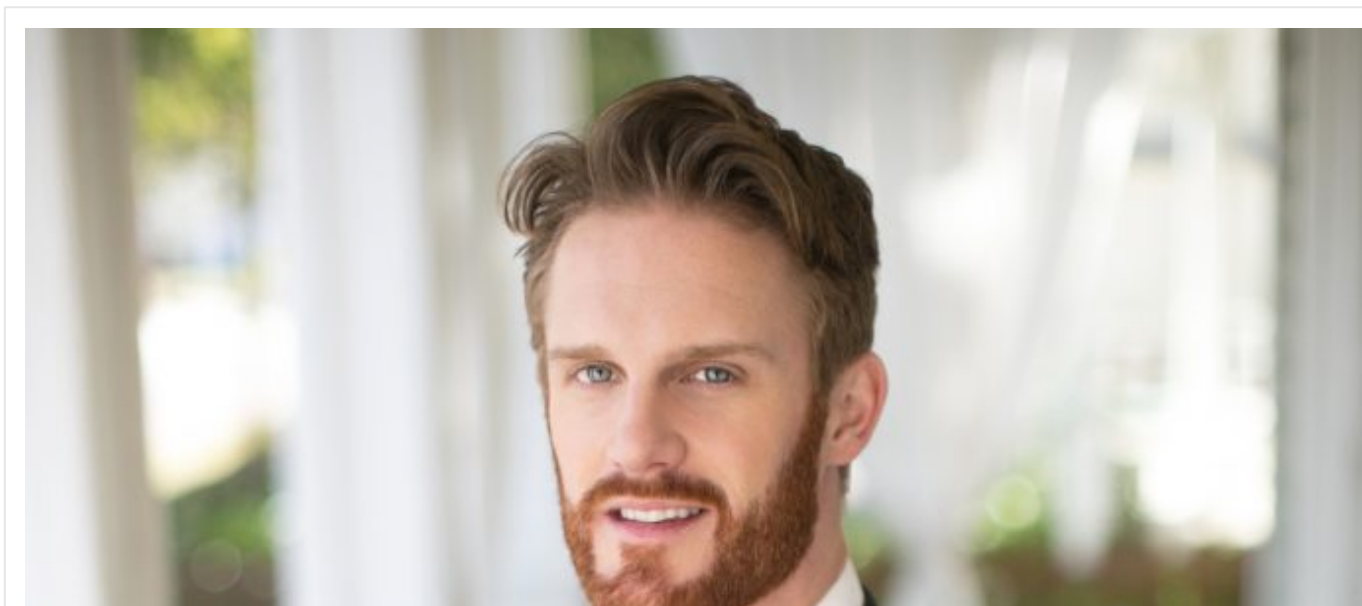
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San Diego Symphony and Master Chorale Deliver a Rewarding Surprise: Puccini's 'Messa di Gloria'

By Ken Herman (<http://www.sandiegostory.com/author/kenherman/>) | March 25, 2019 | [o](http://www.sandiegostory.com/san-diego-symphony-and-master-chorale-deliver-a-rewarding-surprise-puccinis-messa-di-gloria/#respond) [●](http://www.sandiegostory.com/san-diego-symphony-and-master-chorale-deliver-a-rewarding-surprise-puccinis-messa-di-gloria/#respond)



When I was an undergraduate music major, no one wasted time discussing the music of Giacomo Puccini. This was the era when Arnold Schoenberg's 12-tone musical doctrine was spreading through North American academic circles as relentlessly as influenza blanketed Europe in 1918.





Courtney Lewis [photo courtesy of San Diego Symphony]

If Igor Stravinsky, Schoenberg's nemesis for the better part of the first half of the last century, had converted to writing 12-tone music by the mid-1950s, who could deny that the future belonged to serialism? And of what relevance was the late-Romantic musical style of Puccini?

At this same time, in his once influential book *Opera as Drama*, the noted Berkeley music historian Joseph Kerman dismissed the music of Puccini's operas as little more than "café-music banalities," and he quickly disposed of Puccini's popular *Tosca* as nothing but a "shabby schocker." Yes, predicting the future is chancy at best.

In 1951, when Kerman joined the University of California music department, who would have imagined the sheer number of opera companies operating in North America some 50 years later? And it is indisputable that the operas of Puccini have become even more securely entrenched in the regular programming of these opera companies, regardless of their size and budget.

But Friday's San Diego Symphony Concert with the San Diego Master Chorale—under the baton of guest conductor Courtney Lewis—revealed yet another unexpected aspect of Puccini: a compelling performance of his *Messa di Gloria* for chorus, three soloists and orchestra. Puccini had written this extensive work as his graduation piece from the music conservatory in his hometown of Lucca, Italy. But after he left Lucca for Milan and the world of opera, his success as an opera composer left this mass sitting on a library shelf in Lucca for over 70 years. And even after its modern revival with a performance in Chicago in 1952, it has curiously remained in the shadows.

Puccini's broadly conceived opening three movements—the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, and *Credo*—made such a strong case, I was preparing to nominate the work as a second cousin to the Verdi Requiem. But either the composer ran out of time or inspiration, because the *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*—the two closing mass movements—sounded seriously underwritten, essentially turned over to two of the soloists to dispatch with more efficiency than inspiration.

The outer sections of the *Kyrie* found the Master Chorale spinning out Puccini's gentle, beautifully shaped themes of petition with a warm, ingratiating sonority, adding just the right amount of brilliance and ardor for the center section, the "Christe Eleison," intently driven by full orchestra and insistent beats of the timpani.

Knowing Puccini's mature opera style, it is hard to block out the *Gloria*'s operatic associations, from the spirited—even frothy—opening "Gloria in excelsis" that called to my mind a festive crowd scene in a comic opera, to the "Qui tollis peccata mundi," set in the form of a grand, triumphal march. But Puccini was hardly unaware of musical tradition, setting the *Gloria*'s last section, "cum Sancto Spiritu," in a well worked-out fugue, the favored way to treat that text that goes back to composers before J. S. Bach. Not surprisingly, Puccini's fugue subject sounds quite a bit flashier than we have come to expect from Bach or Mozart, but it is equally crafted and fitted with particularly resplendent orchestration.

Puccini opens his *Credo* with somber, dramatic strokes in a suitably minor mode. Even in the "Et incarnatus es," which composers from the Renaissance to the present have usually crafted in hushed reverence, Puccini requires the tenor to declaim this article of faith dramatically, which Leonardo Capalbo sang with admirable fire and stirring tone. His colleague, bass Michael Sumuel, brought even greater passion with his stentorian *basso profundo* in Puccini's "Crucifixus," in which the composer doubled the soloist's line an octave below with solo bassoon, a clever but effective ploy used by the best Baroque oratorio composers.

In Puccini's exuberant "Et resurrexit" and "Et vitam venturi," the Master Chorale flexed its ample musical muscle, displaying vibrant and astutely balanced fortes that testified to the superb work behind the scene of its Music Director John K. Russell.

Baritone Daniel Okulich's extensive solo in the "Benedictus" filled out most of Puccini's *Sanctus*, although the slight quaver in his generous baritone distracted from the elegance of the composer's vocal line. He was joined by tenor Capalbo in a persuasive account of the *Agnus Dei*, under which the Master Chorale floated an aptly entreating "misereri nobis."

Guest conductor Lewis displayed authority and deep conviction, skillfully leading the array of musical forces on the Copley Symphony Hall stage through this profound sacred work. Before orchestra directors decide on programming yet another "Lord Nelson" Mass, they should seriously consider Puccini's *Messa di Gloria*.

Lewis opened this concert with Haydn's Symphony No. 88 in G Major, one of the composer's late symphonic works, replete with sophisticated humor and clever, unexpected touches of orchestration. Too many conductors rush through a Haydn symphony, as if to assure their audiences that something much better awaits them on the program. Lewis, however, did more than give Papa Haydn his due. His approach struck me as jauntily assertive, demanding polish from the strings, but animated, even playful, articulations and dramatic dynamic contrasts from the entire orchestra. The eager San Diego Symphony gave this energetic young conductor from Northern Ireland everything he asked for.

This program by the San Diego Symphony was presented on March 22 & 23, 2019, at the Jacobs Music Center in downtown San Diego. The March 22 performance was attended for this review.



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Ken Herman, a classically trained pianist and organist, has covered music for the San Diego Union, the Los Angeles Times' San Diego Edition, and for sandiego.com. He has won numerous awards, including first place for Live Performance and Opera Reviews in the 2017, the 2018, and the 2019 Excellence in Journalism Awards competition held by the San Diego Press Club. A Chicago native, he came to San Diego to pursue a graduate degree and stayed. [Read more... \(//sandiegostory.com/?page_id=107\)](http://sandiegostory.com/?page_id=107)

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