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Arts & Theatre



**SAVOR EXQUISITE OFFERINGS
BY VERO'S OPERA AND BALLET**

ARTS & THEATRE

Savor exquisite offerings by Vero's Opera and Ballet

BY SAMANTHA BAITA
Staff Writer

The cultural opportunities in our small city have long been impressive: the diversity, excellence, sophistication and support far exceeding the norm for a city of our modest size. Excellent examples this past week were Vero Beach Opera's "Madama Butterfly" and Ballet Vero Beach's "All Rodriguez," both staged at the Vero Beach High School Performing Arts Center.

A staple of the operatic repertoire worldwide, Puccini's tragic masterpiece about a U.S. Naval officer, Pinkerton, and the young Japanese geisha he marries "for convenience" is, arguably, Vero Beach Opera's most impressive, virtually flawless, fully staged production to date.

Performing for the first time with the Vero Beach Opera (hopefully the first of many collaborations) was the highly respected Atlantic Classical Orchestra, under the baton of Met veteran and Grammy winner Caren Levine, a petite, charismatic powerhouse, who made a daunting respon-



Clockwise from left: "Madama Butterfly" performed by the Vero Beach Opera. Marie Antunez with Drew Alexander Upton. Tiziana Lahey (in hat) as Pinkerton's "real American wife." Marie Antunez and Martin Nusspaumer as Madama Butterfly and U.S. Naval officer Pinkerton.

PHOTOS BY J. PATRICK RICE



sibility look easy. Even fun.

The opera-savvy, full-house audience was engaged from the moment the curtain rose on the gorgeous, exquisitely lighted set: a house and garden overlooking Nagasaki Harbor. Acting and singing were equally excellent, and the flow, curtain to curtain, belied the almost three-hour length.



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Experience and numerous contacts at the apex of the opera world have served VBO Artistic Director Roman Ortega-Cowan and President Joan Ortega-Cowan well as, through the years, they have transformed the all-local Vero Beach Opera Guild of the 1980s into a professional company with sufficient clout to draw top international stars.

The strong, well-chosen cast of "Madama Butterfly" included a husband and wife: Uruguayan soprano Marie Antunez as Madama Butterfly, and Uruguayan tenor Martin Nusspaumer as Pinkerton. Antunez was able to maintain the geisha physicality while projecting the broad, emotional vocal dimensions the story demanded, and Nusspaumer was an excellent match, a charming cad, able at once to convey blithe affection and careless cruelty.

The cast included local resident Tiziana Lahey, who more than held her own after suspending an opera career to raise a family. Lahey, a soprano, portrayed Pinkerton's "real American wife" Kate, whose return to Nagasaki with Pinkerton three years later, after Butterfly has faithfully awaited his return to her and their young son, Sorrow, impels Butterfly's tragic and dramatic suicide.

Sorrow is typically a scene-stealer, and preschooler Drew Alexander Upton certainly was, performing with 4-year-old charm: there was a rather lengthy segment in which Sorrow, Butterfly and her companion Suzuki, beautifully sung by mezzo soprano Mabel Ledo, stood on a ledge amidst heaps of blossoms, gazing at the Harbor, awaiting Pinkerton's ship. Upton, who was to fall asleep, remained so for a good long while. Finally, enough was enough, and he studiously began brushing the blossoms off the ledge, totally in character and totally adorable.

"Madama Butterfly" received aloud, lengthy, well-deserved standing ovation, and the audience's exit conversations were filled with superlatives.

Ballet Vero Beach presented what turned out to be a completely delightful evening of not-your-grandma's-



Camilo Rodriguez.
PHOTO BY DENISE RITCHIE

ballet: "All Rodriguez." In its fifth season, the uber-talented young company has just come off a hugely successful season opener, "Nutcracker on the Indian River," and this performance was the perfect "next show."

Camilo Rodriguez is the company's ballet master and principal dancer. He began his ballet career in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and honed his skills touring internationally. With the famous Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo he discovered his gift for parody. In "All Rodriguez" the dancer also showcased an unexpected talent: choreography.

Against a simple drop, which changed colors throughout the evening, the dancers, in simple black or white leotards, allowed their uber-disciplined, dance-honed physicality, the music and the choreography to shine. In the first segment, "Divertissement Nostalgie," with music by local composer Paul Gay, Alyssa Grimsley and Alexandra Hoffman on point, moved through the music, in sync, counterpoint and solo, evoking pure, elegant classical combinations, showcasing each dancer, in tulle, then tutus, then simple leotards.

The second segment, "The Swan," recalled the Les Ballets Trockadero. To Saint-Saens' "LeCygne," in classic white swan attire all lovers of the dance recognize, drag has never looked so feathery, as Rodriguez entered gracefully on point, scattering hundreds of feathers across the stage from an apparently molting tutu and sending the audience into hysterics.

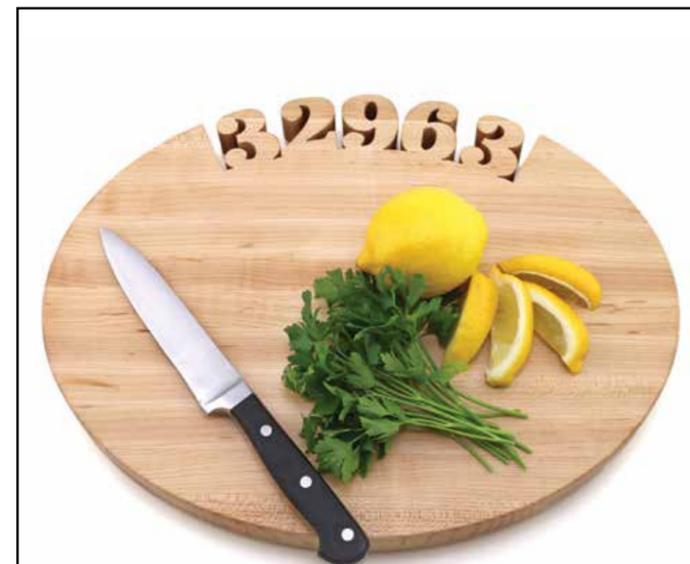
In "Afternoon in the Paddock" to Debussy's "Prelude to Afternoon of

a Faun," Rodriguez employed his elegant uber-disciplined dancer's body to own the compelling music, as he transformed into a faun, or perhaps a

colt, exploring and frolicking in a dappled meadow (one viewer's interpretation). It was quite mesmerizing.

The final segment, "Sheer Vibration," to music by Grieg, was originally part of the Interpretive Dance Series at the Vero Beach Museum of Art, and featured Grimsley, Hoffman and Matthew Carter, moving together, then separately, in a playful mix of styles and combinations.

In an hour and a half, Rodriguez had revealed a quite exceptional, very distinctive gift for choreography, which one hopes he'll continue to nurture and share. ■



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TWO MEMORABLE SUNDAY EVENING CONCERTS

KIRILL KARABITS
Conductor
Staatskapelle Weimar

February 25: The Staatskapelle Weimar Orchestra, founded in 1491 and likely the world's most historic orchestra, is making its premiere North American tour! Tonight's Concert will feature two of the world's most melodious composers - Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner. Kirill Karabits, Conductor of the Year (Royal Philharmonic Society Awards), is "an inspired architect... an energetic presence... who brought the house down" (The Telegraph). Karabits has also guest conducted the Cleveland, Philadelphia and San Francisco Symphony Orchestras. The concert will feature celebrated British soprano Catherine Foster. Don't miss this Occasion!

PAUL HUANG
Violinist
Brevard Symphony Orchestra

March 4: The Brevard Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Christopher Confessore, will feature virtuoso Violinist Paul Huang, performing Samuel Barber's Violin Concerto. The twenty-three year old Taiwanese-American - recipient of Lincoln Center's most prestigious Award - has earned worldwide attention for his eloquent music making. Antonin Dvorak's Symphony #6 will also be featured. Come enjoy Huang's very special "return to Vero Beach" Concert!

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