

Street scene from the opening of *La bohème*

## La bohème Puccini

HARPA CONCERT HALL,  
REYKJAVÍK

\*\*\*

Review by Neil Jones  
Photography by Gísli Egill Hrafnsson

As the audience entered the concert hall, what felt like a cast of thousands were already there, evincing a Paris street scene with cyclists, musicians, vendors and entertainers disporting themselves not just on the stage but through the auditorium as well.

There were, in fact, more than a hundred performers on stage, including a children's chorus of 32, which made for a dynamic, fascinating opening picture. Then, conductor Daníel Bjarnason entered, the assembled cast disappeared and, almost magically, all the accoutrements of a Parisian garret took shape on stage.

Set designer Will Bowen created a monotone Paris skyline that stretched in a massive curve from one balcony end to the other, filling the horizon. Across the rear of the stage was a six-part translucent screen on which were projected street scenes and later, the all-important candle. Add the furniture, along with a big metal gate at the rear, and Bowen cleverly had all the set requirements of *La bohème* neatly covered,

despite there being no fly-tower nor stage wings in the newly built Harpa Hall.

Musically the Icelandic Opera Orchestra occasionally teetered on the edge of pedestrianism, although the quieter sections of the opera were played with exquisite delicacy.

That delicacy was a gift to the singers, especially Hulda Björk Garðarsdóttir as Mimì, although her voice has the heft to handle even the most unsympathetic of orchestras. As a young woman in love she was magnificent; as a dying consumptive, though, she was perhaps less convincing, radiating far too much good health (it must be all that bracing Icelandic fresh air!).

Gissur Páll Gissurarson was a splendid Rodolfo. His 'Che gelida manina' was just effortless, and his voice beautifully matched Garðarsdóttir in their duets.

Marcello, Schaunard and Colline were sung by Ágúst Ólafsson, Hrólfur Sæmundsson and Jóhann Smári Sævarsson, and their singing was a highlight of the production. In fact, none of the singing from this all-Icelandic cast disappointed.

The outstanding memory of this *Bohème*, however, will be the sheer exuberance of the end of Act II where the stage was busy once again with the full ensemble cast, including a military band that played their way off the stage, into and out of the auditorium. It was a triumph of direction for Jamie Haye, but it left a feeling that the following two acts never quite reached the same theatrical intensity.

It did prove, however, that Icelandic Opera's decision to make its home at Harpa, despite the lack of stage facilities, was the right one.