

# Review and video: POV brings it all together for Mary's Wedding

BY KEVIN BAZZANA, TIMES COLONIST NOVEMBER 12, 2011



The decision to add a chorus to the opera was made so that some of the minor characters could be portrayed. (November, 2011)

**Photograph by:** Bruce Stotesbury, timescolonist.com

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## REVIEW

**What:** Pacific Opera Victoria: *Mary's Wedding*, by Stephen Massicotte and Andrew Paul MacDonald, directed by Michael Shamata, conducted by Timothy Vernon.

**When/where:** Nov. 12, 14, 16 and 18, 8 p.m.; Nov. 20, 2: 30 p.m.; McPherson Playhouse; pre-performance lectures at 7 p.m. (1: 30 p.m. on Nov. 20).

**Tickets:** \$32.50 to \$142.50; student rush tickets \$15, at the door 45 minutes before each performance, subject to availability. Call 250-386-6121; online at [rmts.bc.ca](http://rmts.bc.ca); in person at the Royal and McPherson Box Offices.

*Mary's Wedding* is the first work Pacific Opera Victoria can really call its own, having been intimately

involved in its development from the commission, in 2008, to the première, which took place Thursday evening at the McPherson Playhouse. The company's hands-on attention has resulted in an opera that it can be proud of and that merits a future in the repertory.

It is based on Stephen Massicotte's popular 2002 play of the same name, set in Saskatchewan in 1920 and dramatizing the dreams of Mary, who, on the eve of her wedding, remembers her first love, the farmboy Charlie, and the letters he sent her while serving during the First World War in France, where he died in battle.

Massicotte himself crafted a libretto that is eventful but also tight and well-paced, if not especially poetic or melody-friendly, and composer Andrew Paul MacDonald, working in an accessible, versatile tonal idiom, has been a devoted servant of the drama, his music responding nimbly and vividly to both text and subtext.

It helps that MacDonald, whose oeuvre comprises mostly instrumental music, is a skilful, imaginative orchestrator, able to deploy a generous palette of tonal colours in often busy accompaniments, without smothering or drawing focus from the voices. In the pit, three dozen members of the Victoria Symphony (three of them manning an unusually large percussion battery) are conducted with passion and deep commitment by POV artistic director Timothy Vernon.

There is a portion of merely workaday recitative here and there, especially during expository passages, but as the drama becomes more complicated and emotionally urgent, the music becomes more interesting, original and compelling. There are ardent surges of lyricism underscoring the romance of Mary and Charlie, several elegiac episodes and some impressively powerful specimens of battle music. The level of musical inspiration actually seems to rise as the opera progresses and is especially high at the end of each act.

The story takes place within Mary's mind, so the action moves often and quickly between times and places; in MacDonald's score, these transitions are convincing and seamless. One also detects, at times, the outlines of conventional operatic numbers - arias, duets and, most obviously, big choral set pieces.

Indeed, the 20-person chorus gets some of the most effective music in the opera. It was MacDonald's decision to add a chorus to *Mary's Wedding*, to embody minor characters only mentioned in the play, and the opera seems frankly inconceivable without it: It brings welcome variety of texture, both dramatically and musically, without compromising the essential intimacy of the story.

The fresh-faced young singers portraying the central couple - soprano Betty Wayne Allison and tenor Thomas Macleay - have personable voices that are fortunately not out of proportion to the characters or story or venue (though Macleay's is occasionally dampened in some spots on the stage).

Crucially, both have real acting talent; their various encounters are sweet, touching, funny and genuine.

Bass Alain Coulombe makes a big impression as Lt. Gordon Flowerdew, a character drawn from real life. His role registers particularly strongly in Act 2, and he (along with Massicotte, MacDonald and everyone else) deserves special praise for the understated power of Flowerdew's death scene.

As directed by Michael Shamata, the opera, like the play, is often moving and always highly theatrical.

(Both acts culminate in a terrific finale that includes a stylishly staged battle scene.) The production, designed by Ian Rye (set and costumes) and Alan Brodie (lighting), is beautiful and sometimes arresting to look at.

The stage, bare but for a tree and some transient furnishings, is dominated by a striking backdrop and by three asymmetrical, undulating ramps that keep the stage traffic interesting and appropriately suggest, at different times, farmland, the sea and trenches.

Video:

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