



**NEWS** *from Young Concert Artists, Inc.*

*Julia Bullock, soprano*

# OPERA NEWS

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## *Girls of the Golden West*

SAN FRANCISCO

San Francisco Opera

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The *Girls of the Golden West* at San Francisco Opera, with Julia Bullock, center, and Davone Tines, right  
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**T**HE MOST EAGERLY ANTICIPATED event of San Francisco Opera's fall season was the world premiere of *Girls of the Golden West* on November 21, and the company's opening-night performance lived up to expectations. The latest collaboration from composer John Adams and librettist/director Peter Sellars, the opera is a work steeped in California history that speaks to the politics of today. Cocommissioned with Dallas Opera and Dutch National Opera, *Girls* was given a ten-performance run in San Francisco. It offers a richly imagined score, a libretto drawn from historical sources and an affectingly staged production.

Set amid the tumult of the California Gold Rush, the work incorporates Latin American and Chinese poetry, writings by Mark Twain and Frederick Douglass, and lyrics from nineteenth-century miners' songs. Its primary source is "The Shirley Letters," written by Louise Clappe (a.k.a. Dame Shirley), a doctor's wife who traveled from her East Coast home to Northern California in the 1850s. In letters to her sister, she described a mining camp winter, supplying a wealth of information about the "wild and barbarous life" of the milieu. As the opera's central character, Dame Shirley is a watchful narrator of the tragic turn taken by her adopted community, which moves from an atmosphere of rugged optimism to scenes of venality, xenophobia, environmental destruction and shocking brutality.

Act I opens in an antic disposition, as Clarence, a resident of the camp, extols the manly virtues of his fellow miners. Dame Shirley makes a comic arrival in a springless covered wagon driven by former slave Ned Peters. Miner Joe Cannon, whose girl back home has instructed him not to return until he's struck it rich, falls for Ah Sing, a Chinese prostitute. Mexican saloon workers Josefa and Ramón sing a delicate love duet. In several episodes, the action stalls; a tour of Dame Shirley's modest cabin, for instance, fails to advance the plot in any discernable fashion. Act II brings the opera's themes into dramatic focus. Set designer David Gropman created stylized redwood trees for Act I, which give way to the mutilated stump of a massive sequoia, where a scene from *Macbeth* is played. (Shakespeare, it is noted, was a favorite of the miners.) The flow of gold has peaked, and the white miners find easy scapegoats in the immigrant population. Amid a July Fourth celebration, which includes choreographer John Heginbotham's provocative Spider Dance for the notorious dancer Lola Montez, Ned delivers a show-stopping aria incorporating text from Douglass's "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?" Josefa, who has been assaulted by Joe, stabs him and is lynched by a hastily assembled mob.

Adams, who was awarded the San Francisco Opera Medal (the company's highest honor) following the opening-night performance, is adept at building tension through gripping sonic climaxes. His electronically enhanced score is densely orchestrated, with cowbells suggesting the sound of pickaxes striking stone, a jazzy stroll for Joe and Ah Sing, a gorgeous aria for Josefa and a serene final reverie for Dame Shirley. The composer's signature driving rhythms propel the opera with distinctly American fervor. Conductor Grant Gershon led the orchestra in a shapely, enveloping performance. Mark Grey was credited with the effective sound design.

The cast featured several company debuts. Julia Bullock bowed as Dame Shirley, introducing San Francisco Opera audiences to her lithe soprano and warm, alert stage presence. Bass-baritone Davóne Tines built his impressive Ned on equal parts comic agility and sophistication. J'Nai Bridges was a regal, plush-voiced Josefa, and Hye Jung Lee imbued Ah Sing with secure coloratura flights. Ryan McKinny's energetic Clarence, Paul Appleby's volatile Joe and Elliot Madore's dignified Ramón made strong contributions. The men of the San Francisco Opera Chorus sang with gusto as the miners. —Georgia Rowe