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## MOT's 'Silent Night' production rises to level of Pulitzer-winning opera

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(Photo: Mitty Carter)

The most deeply felt moment in "[Silent Night](/story/entertainment/music/2016/11/09/puts-silent-night-mot/93113574/)," the opera by composer [Kevin Puts](#) and librettist [Mark Campbell](#) that opened at the Detroit Opera House on Saturday, comes when the sprawling and violent canvas of World War I morphs into a quiet scene of desperate loneliness sung by a single French officer at his desk in a battlefield bunker.

Premiered in 2011, "Silent Night" tells the unlikely but true story of an impromptu Christmas Eve ceasefire that broke out on the front lines among a small band of Scottish, French and German soldiers in 1914. The opera opens with a cleverly structured prologue that introduces the major characters and their backstories — all singing in their own languages. It then moves with cinematic fluency through a long and harrowing battlefield scene in which Puts' agitated and dissonant music brings the horror to life, augmented by the sound of bombs, gunfire and screams and accompanied by dramatically flashing lights and filmed backdrops.

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As calm settles, the focus moves to French Lt. Audebert at his desk, exhausted and distraught over losing a photograph of his wife. He sings a tender aria of longing and love for his wife and newborn son, and he sings of needing sleep. Yet he interrupts these lines, counting off the wounded and dead in his ledger in plainspoken finality. The juxtaposition is striking — a good example of the power of Campbell's tautly constructed libretto.

Puts' melodic line here, filled with plaintive minor thirds, is rich with poignancy but not sentimentality. The spare orchestral accompaniment makes use of repetitive tolling, effectively underscoring the resignation of the scene. On Saturday, baritone Phillip Addis as Audebert brought a warm and understated beauty to this scene, and the MOT Orchestra, led by David Charles Abell, floated ethereally through the score.



Philip Addis as Lt. Audebert of the Michigan Opera Theatre rehearses for *Silent Night* at the Detroit Opera House. (Photo: Mitty Carter)

Not everything in "Silent Night" rises to this rarefied level of expression, but the opera is a remarkable achievement. It makes a powerful statement about the shared humanity of soldiers beneath their uniforms and the nationalist fervor that so often sends them to war. You can understand why the opera won Puts, 44, the Pulitzer Prize for music in 2012 and why it's been performed in about a dozen cities in North America and Ireland since its debut at Minnesota Opera, which commissioned it.

MOT's production rises to the level of the opera, which is based on the 2005 French film "Joyeux Noël." Rarely has the company displayed such high-level production values. The scenic design, originally created for Minnesota Opera by Francis O'Connor, features a revolving set that allows the action to flow smoothly between the Scottish, French and German camps and perspectives. Director Eric Simonson revives his original staging, balancing fast-paced and naturalistic battle scenes with more intimate episodes and deftly handled complications like, for instance the opera-within-an-opera that opens the prologue. Multimedia elements and lighting all contribute in organic ways.

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Puts' score is fluent in several musical languages. He moves easily from the neo-Mozart-like strains of the prologue to Schubert-influenced songs and dissonant modernism. Long orchestral passages carry the weight of a de facto symphony. Though there are passages that slip into a generic neo-romanticism, Puts generally keeps the emotional subtext percolating in the orchestra.

The savvy pacing, clarity and sly use of humor in Campbell's libretto are also crucial, as is the way music itself leads directly to the temporary peace. It is the German opera singer-soldier Sprink, who suddenly leaps into the no-man's land to sing, opening the door to the truce. Soon the men are sharing chocolate and pictures of their wives and girlfriends. After this emotional high point, the second act, in which the consequences of the soldiers' actions play out with tragic results, feels anticlimactic. But the opera never fails to sustain interest.



Chad Johnson as Nikolaus Sprink and Erin Wall as Anna Sorensen of the Michigan Opera Theatre rehearse *Silent Night* at the Detroit Opera House. (Photo: Mitty Carter)

MOT's cast has its ups and downs. Addis' Audebert was a standout, but, despite a fundamentally attractive voice, tenor Chad Johnson's Sprink did not command the stage with enough presence or vocal power to convincingly portray the central figure in the drama. On the other hand, Jeff Byrnes and John Robert Lindsey as the Scottish brothers Jonathan and William both sang with strength, poise and emotion. Alexandre Sylvestre's Ponchel, the innocent aide-de-camp to Lt. Audebert, sang with sweetness and character. Soprano Erin Wall's creamy, well-modulated voice made a strong impression as the opera singer Anna Sorensen.

The rest of the large ensemble, both individuals and chorus, all delivered what was needed. In the pit, Abell has the orchestra sounding crisp and expressive. In the end, this is an opera — and a production — in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

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## 'Silent Night' by Kevin Puts

Four out of four stars

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