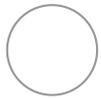


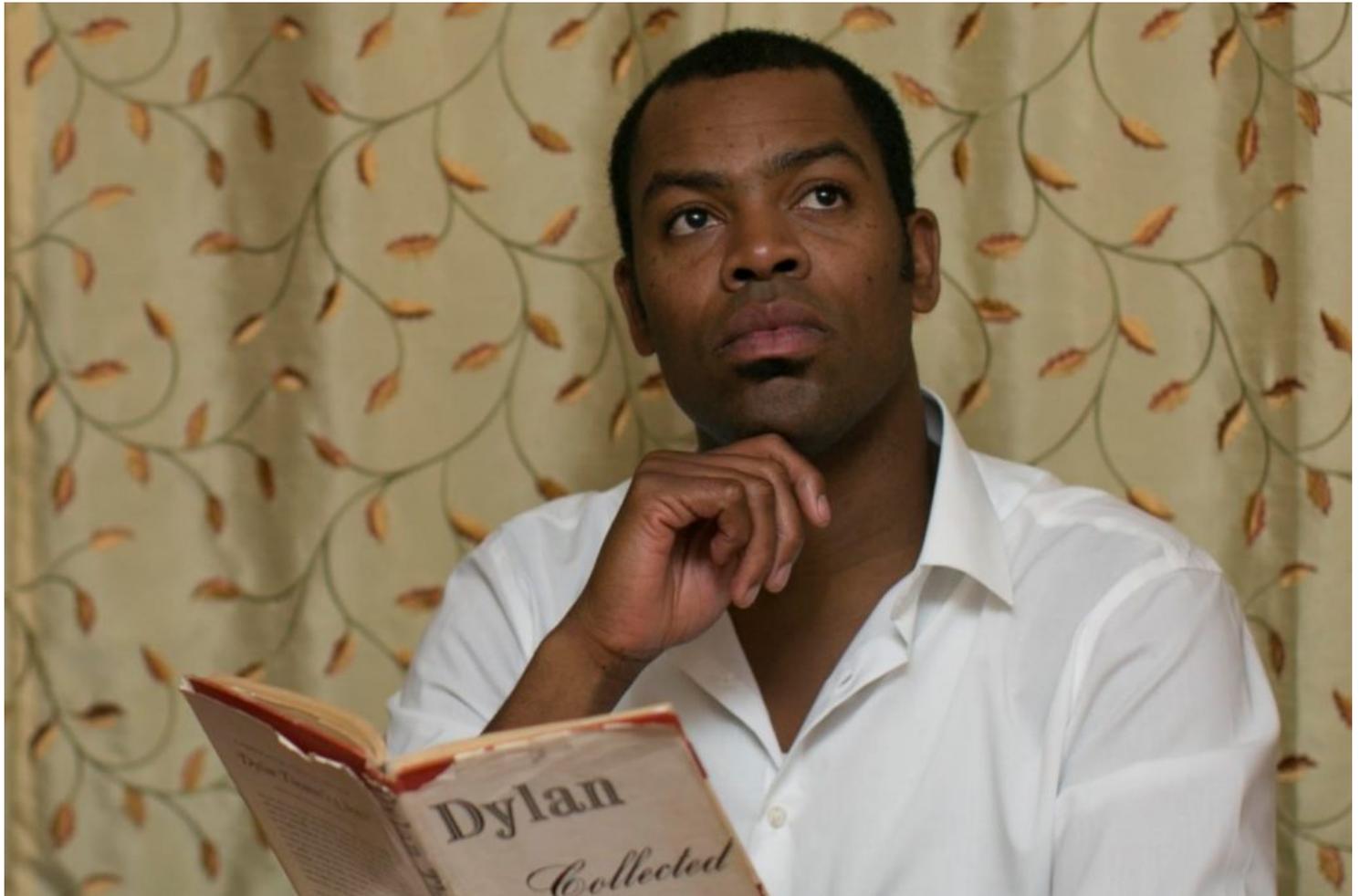


CLASSICAL MUSIC

Review: New operatic treatment of 'Howards End' keeps missing connections



Joshua Kosman | February 23, 2019 | Updated: February 23, 2019, 6:48 pm





In his 1910 masterpiece “Howards End,” the novelist E.M. Forster gave us one of literature’s pithiest guides to life. “Only connect!” he wrote, in a formulation simple enough to be a dorm-room mantra but rich enough to contain multitudes.

The connections Forster urged are many and various – between one person and another, between our own moral judgments and those of others, between the poetry that gives life its sparkle and the prose (and the money) that makes all of it possible.

Trying to pack all of those connections and more into a chamber opera is an ambitious undertaking. So perhaps it’s not too surprising that “Howards End, America,” a new work by composer Allen Shearer and librettist Claudia Stevens that opened a three-performance world premiere production on Friday, Feb. 22, at Z Space, winds up feeling a little undernourished.

But the creators weren’t content to tackle the challenges inherent in adapting Forster’s novel as written. In a decision that was either impressively bold or simply foolhardy, they decided to complicate the task further by transporting “Howards End” from its home in Edwardian England – where it sits with complete comfort and specificity – to Boston of the 1950s.

For Stevens, that meant turning the businessman Henry Wilcox into a well-heeled banker, and the two Schlegel sisters – flighty, artistic Helen and the more sober-minded intellectual Margaret – into well-heeled boho wannabes. But most importantly, it entailed turning Leonard Bast – the young clerk who in Forster’s London ekes out a subsistence living while trying to acquire the cultural knowledge that is the Schlegel sisters’ birthright – into an African American man.

Race, in Boston in the 1950s, turns out to be just as perilous a cherry bomb as you might imagine. There are parallels to be drawn, surely, between class in England and race in America; but in general they obscure as much as they illuminate.



about whose profundities the novelist is famously eloquent. Shearer and Stevens ingeniously adopt the Ninth instead, weaving reminiscences of Beethoven through the chamber score and aptly laying emphasis on the message of universal brotherhood in the “Ode to Joy.”

But what does Beethoven represent an escape from? In Forster, a dull, gray workaday existence, but in “Howards End, America,” the jazz standards of Fats Waller and George Gershwin that Bast’s wife Jacky sang during her heyday as a nightclub singer. If Beethoven’s music stands for nothing more than that kind of cultural imperialism, who needs it?

Shearer and Stevens’ previous operatic collaboration, “**Middlemarch in Spring**,” was a deft and joyful adaptation of George Eliot’s novel, which wisely pulled a single narrative thread from the source material, boiling it down enough to provide room for musical expansion. “Howards End, America,” by contrast, although it jettisons some minor characters and incidents, winds up tracking the novel’s entire narrative course.

So it isn’t long before the dramaturgy begins to feel rushed and breathless. And with a few exceptions, Shearer’s score doesn’t do enough to bring the drama to life.



Soprano Nikki Einfeld as Margaret Schlegel in “Howards End, America.”
Photo: Jasmine Van T

There are a couple of notable arias, including a lovely deathbed elegy for Henry’s first wife and Margaret’s decision, resolute and climactic, to leave her marriage to Henry and take a Greyhound to a new life. Shearer slips in a brief, funny scene that captures the mechanized rhythms of life in Henry’s bank. But much of the vocal writing feels talky and bland, and nearly all of it proceeds at the same stately, uninflected pace, as if it were simply a spoken play set to melody.

The weekend’s production, presented by Earplay, boasts a first-rate cast of fine local singers, conducted by Mary Chun and directed by Philip Lowery on an ingeniously fluid set supplemented by Jeremy Knight’s video projections.

Philip Skinner was announced as ill, but he sang the role of Henry with all the robust vigor and tonal authority he brings to every assignment. Nikki Einfeld and Sara

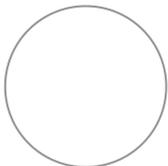


piercing beauty.

Michael Dailey’s Leonard was a compelling blend of dignity and pathos, and Candace Johnson as Jacky struck just the right note of impish danger. Erin Neff sang tenderly as the dying Ruth, and Daniel Cilli shone as Henry’s glowering, entitled son Charles.

But for all the vocal splendor on display, “Howards End, America” keeps raising key issues – of personal relations, of economic justice, of race – without giving them a vivid musical existence. That’s the connection that continually falters.

“Howards End, America”: 8 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 23; 2 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 24. \$30-\$45. Z Space, 450 Florida St., S.F. 415-659-8132. www.zspace.org



Joshua Kosman

Joshua Kosman is The San Francisco Chronicle’s music critic. Email: jkosman@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @JoshuaKosman

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