

THE REHEARSAL STUDIO

A PLACE TO EXERCISE IDEAS BEFORE WRITING ABOUT THEM WITH GREATER DISCIPLINE.

MONDAY, JANUARY 21, 2019

Four “Snapshots” of Death from West Edge Opera

Yesterday afternoon in the Diane and Tad Taube Atrium Theater, West Edge Opera presented the San Francisco performance of their annual Snapshot program. This is their annual opportunity to showcase efforts of West Coast composers and librettists that may still be work-in-progress by presenting “snapshots” in the form of excerpts with minimal staging and music provided by the Earplay new music ensemble. Probably more by coincidence than by design, all four of yesterday’s offerings involved the subject of death; but not all of the performances succumbed to the maudlin.

The most interesting of these was *Ivonne*, a monodrama by composer Nathaniel Stookey setting a libretto by Jerre Dye. The narrative was based on an anthropological project to collect stories about memorable events that took place in the old Sears building in Chicago.

[correction 1/22, 9:30 a.m.: I have it on good authority that the oral history was based on an abandoned building in Memphis, Tennessee.] The title character is the head secretary of a steno pool with a strong sense of order and structure, who has to contend with one of her staff having a miscarriage in the women’s bathroom.

The role was performed by soprano Marnie Breckenridge, with a meticulously designed all-white outfit and a tube of vivid red lipstick as her only prop. The excerpts presented included the first establishment of her rigid character (with exhaustive detail about the color and application of the lipstick), followed by her confrontation with the woman in the bathroom and her dead child. Earplay conductor Mary Chun led a trio of violin (Terrie Baune), viola (Ellen Ruth Rose), and piano (Brenda Tom) in a taut score that captured all of the edgy details of a woman whose obsessions with order have been disrupted beyond her control. Of all four offerings on the program, this was the one that left the most intense curiosity as to what would happen next (without knowing whether or not the libretto itself would answer that question).

[addition 1/22, 9:30 a.m.: I have it on even better authority that *Ivonne* was performed in its entirety, so whatever happens next is left to the imagination of the audience!]

STEPHEN SMOLIAR



The author's construction of his reality of self!

ABOUT ME

STEPHEN SMOLIAR

Still trying to "liberate the mind from fear, superstition and pettiness."

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BLOG ARCHIVE

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Not quite as intense was Beth Ratay's opera *Medicum Mortem* (Doctor Death). Readers may recognize the English translation as the name the media gave to Jack Kevorkian due to his belief in a terminal patient's right to die through physician-assisted suicide. Andrew Rechnitz' libretto complicates this situation by make the terminally-ill patient (soprano Julia Hathaway) the daughter of the doctor (baritone Daniel Cilli).

However, the opening excerpt is a setting of an impassioned plea by a District Attorney (tenor J. Raymond Meyers) when the doctor is being tried for murder. Meyers' character runs through all of the usual pieties and accusatory slurs, providing a chilling evocation of current tendencies to reduce everything to black-and-white simplicity by sacrificing any subtleties that may be introduced through a richer context. (Can we take it that any resemblance between Meyers' rhetoric and that of Fox News is purely coincidental?)

Less compelling were the excerpts from *The Road to Xibalba*, which is based on myths about the underworld as depicted in the Popol Vuh. The filmed introduction by librettist John Campion suggested that the plot was an assembly of a large number of different myths taken from the source text. This turned out to be a disappointing case of TMI (too much information), since the excerpts performed were only a few fragments taken from Campion's elaborate exposition. The music by Cindy Cox was rich in alternative techniques for just about all of the Earplay performers (conducted by Jonathan Khuner); and, for the most part, the most expressive moments came not from any of the five participating singers but from the thoroughly chilling sonorities that Peter Josheff elicited from his bass clarinet.

Most disappointing was *Zheng*, an opera about the mezzo Zheng Cao, who died of lung cancer at the age of 46. The score was written by Shinji Eshima, who, as a member of the bass section of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra, had come to know Cao well. One got the impression that much of Tony Asaro's libretto was a product of Eshima's personal memories, probably supplemented by those of others familiar with her personal life.

Ironically, Cilli had the opportunity to "play doctor" again, this time taking the role of the physician who not only saw to the last four years of Cao's treatment but also became her husband. Eshima's score was clearly intended as an affectionate character study, but too much of what was presented in the excerpts came to the brink of mawkish sentimentality. Getting too close to one's subject matter is always a

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Next Month

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February, 2019

risky proposition; and, in its current form, *Zheng* had not yet established how it will confront and overcome that risk.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 7:43 AM 

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A Fascinating Choice Required
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Tommy Emmanuel's Tenth
Dynamite Guitars Gig
Rachel Barton Pine to Join PBO
for "Pivotal" Event...
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Envelop: January, 2018
Diversity in Abundance at Tape
Music Festival
Music in the Mishkan Returns
to Three Concerts
Adobe Books Announces its
Concert for 2019
A Must-Read Book about Dexter
Gordon
Pamela Z to Perform at Fresh
Festival 2019
Symphony Parnassus Winter
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Chicago Avant-Garde Jazz in
Eighteen Volumes
CMC to Present Dashon Burton
"Conversation"
ABS Offers a Baroque New
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