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THE REHEARSAL STUDIO

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

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2020

Work-in-Progress Needs More Work

Last night at the Taube Atrium Theater, West Edge Opera presented its latest annual installment of Snapshot. This program serves as a showcase for operatic works-in-progress, presenting excerpts ("snapshots") that will hopefully serve as a preview of the finished product. The music is performed by the Earplay new music ensemble, and the vocalists sing from music stands with little suggestion of staging. Each of the excerpts is introduced by a "talking heads" video in which both composer and librettist discuss the ideas leading up to the sample about to be performed.

By way of a disclaimer, I should observe that this is the third Snapshot I have attended; and I have come to feel increasingly disenchanted with the whole endeavor. These presentations amount to a view from some arbitrary location along a long path from initial conception to concluded work. There is no way to know whether what one encounters at that location will be representative of the finished product. For that matter, by the time the project is concluded, that excerpt may not even be part of the finished product.

Furthermore, the contents of those introductory videos may turn out to be just as misleading (if not invalid) as the excerpt being performed. Those familiar with music history can probably rattle off any number of accounts of a creative process in which, halfway through the activity, the creator decides to scrap everything and begin again from scratch (but better informed by past experience). I can easily sympathize with any composer or librettist that views one of those videos after the work has been completed, performed, and reviewed, reflecting back and thinking, "What the hell was I saying at that time?"

Perhaps the best way to approach Snapshot is to treat it as little more than composer and librettist playing with some of the ideas behind the project they envision. Sometimes the play can be productive, sometimes it will be forgotten, and sometimes it might undermine the original intentions. From that point of view, the most potentially

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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productive of last night's offerings was the final one, excerpted from *Gilberto*, composed by Nicolas Lell Benavides working with a libretto by Marella Martin Koch.

This opera amounts to a nostalgic reflection of Sweet's Ballroom, a dance hall in Oakland that was a major center for the Latino community over half a century ago. A young Anglo finds himself at that site the night before he is due to be shipped off to the Korean War. He persuades the title character to teach him to dance, and he is drawn into a new community that receives him gracefully. The "punch line" comes when he learns that Gilberto will also be headed for Korea at the same time, suggesting that the Anglo is acquiring a new perspective on the nature of community itself. Benavides' music draws upon popular genres, but the musical voice is definitely his own. (By way of disclaimer, I should note that I have heard past performances of Benavides' settings of poetry; so I was no stranger to his background as a rising composer.)

In two of the other "snapshots," *El Canguro* and *Moon, Bride, Dogs*, it seemed as if the librettist had deep-ended on a highly elaborate narrative plan based more on bizarre situations than on a well-conceived plot line. The respective composers, Mike von der Nahmer and Ryan Suleiman, each made a noble effort to honor that plan; but, in the absence of any overall context, the results ran the gamut from aimless to tedious. The other selection, Joan Huang's "Eighteen Melodies for Hu-Jia," was actually a completed song cycle. While the music was imaginative, it was hard to see why it was rubbing shoulders with the other three "snapshots."

Earplay was an appropriate ensemble for the showcasing of this new material. This chamber ensemble has had about 35 years of experience in presenting new music to local audiences. They have developed an approach to program books that introduce the composers with useful biographical sketches, each of which is then followed by a one-paragraph account (often written by the composer) of the music that will be performed. This has proved to be an excellent strategy for introducing new work, usually resulting an a full evening of performances serving as an adventurous journey, rather than a muddle through too much of the unfamiliar. Snapshot could learn a thing or two from Earplay when it comes to preparing an audience for an entire evening of the unknown.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 7:21 AM

LABELS: CHAMBER MUSIC, MUSIC, OPERA

▼ February (32)

Evensong at Church of the Advent

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Earplay Launches 35th Season of New Music

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Apollon Musagète Quartet Launches CMSF Season

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Medieval Song Recital Coming to St. Dominic's

The Lighter Side of Beethoven (really!)

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Work-in-Progress Needs More Work

SFCM: February, 2020

The Broad Scope of Anyssa Neumann's Program

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