

LA Opera's 'Recovered Voices' -- A Smorgasbord of All New Tastes

RECOVERED VOICES  
LOS ANGELES OPERA  
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For months, newspapers in Los Angeles have been cranking out stories about James Conlon's mission to revive the lost music of composers who were persecuted during the Nazi era. A \$3.25 million gift from philanthropist Marilyn Ziering served to spearhead "Recovered Voices" -- a multi-year project for Los Angeles Opera which will enable Conlon to present staged productions of the works of these composers. The concerts on March 7 and 10 were just the beginning.

The first concert was an unstaged introduction to the "Recovered Voices" project. It was like a wine-tasting party that ended with a banquet, with some of the selections being more tasty than others. All of the compositions seemed noteworthy, but whether or not they are masterpieces is debatable. Although their levels of atonality vary, my ear was searching for the melodic, and was most fulfilled when listening to soprano Tatiana Pavlovskaya's heartfelt interpretation of "Marietta's Lied" from Erich Wolfgang Korngold's "Die tote Stadt" ("The Dead City"), and to soprano Stacey Tappan's virtuosic delivery of "Liebwerte Freunde" (Nightingale's aria) from Walter Braunfels' "Die Vögel" ("The Birds"). Also quite satisfying was the jazzy selection from Ernst Krenek's "Jonny spielt auf."

Conlon, who often delivers pre-performance lectures in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, gave an overview of the concert and project at the commencement of the evening, asking the audience to hold all applause until after the final selection, since each number was supposed to flow into the other like a symphonic tone poem. Images were projected onto a large screen onstage. Each set of excerpts was introduced with a photo of the opera's composer and his date of birth and demise. The music flowed so flawlessly from one excerpt to the other that it was sometimes difficult to determine the ending of one composer's passages and the beginning of the next -- the styles were at times so similar.

First, Conlon raised his baton to conduct the prelude to Franz Schreker's "Die Gezeichneten." The opera premiered in Frankfurt in 1918, immediately creating controversy for the composer when an influential critic likened Schreker's talent to that of Wagner's. Next, we heard part of Braunfels' "Die Vögel" and Krenek's carnivalesque "Jonny spielt auf." Both operas were successes in the 1920s, but the composers' works were later banned and labeled "Entartete" or "degenerate" music by the Nazis.

Both Viktor Ullmann and Erwin Schulhoff died in concentration camps. Ullmann's "Der Kaiser von Atlantis," with a libretto by Peter Kien, was completed in 1943 in Theresienstadt, but performances of it were prohibited. Ullmann and Kien died in

Auschwitz, and the work was lost until the early '70s. It premiered in Amsterdam in 1975 and focuses on Kaiser Überall, who kills mercilessly during a holy war; and on Death, who, in protest to the war, refrains from allowing anyone to die. "The Emperor's Farewell" was sung expressively by Donnie Ray Albert.

Tenor Rodrick Dixon was not as successful when singing "Conversation with the Sea" from Schulhoff's "Flammen." His voice kept fading in and out as if competing with the orchestra, unable to project over it. "Flammen" is a mix of styles reminiscent of Mozart, Wagner and jazz, and it incorporates the Don Juan theme as in "Don Giovanni."

As soon as we heard the first bars of the prelude to Act 2 from Korngold's Romantic opera, "Die tote Stadt," we were reminded of the orchestral brilliance of Richard Strauss's "Der Rosenkavalier." Korngold's "Marietta's Lied" was an evening highlight followed by "Pierrot's Tanzlied," sung by baritone Martin Gantner. The story line depicts a man's inner turmoil after his wife has died and the struggle he faces after meeting a woman who resembles her. The dream sequence and memorable music made the opera an immediate success after its 1920 premiere in Germany.

Korngold was unique in that he had great success in Europe, was forced to flee during the Nazi era and then became known in the United States for his film scores. He went back to Europe after 1946 to compose more classical works, but he returned to Los Angeles after having been unsuccessful.

"EINE FLORENTINISCHE TRAGÖDIE" (Premiere: Stuttgart, Germany, 1917): After intermission, the wine tasting was over, and the banquet started with "A Florentine Tragedy" as the entrée. Conlon's fascination with forgotten Nazi-era composers originated with his discovery of Alexander von Zemlinsky, who composed the opera, which is based on a play of the same name by Oscar Wilde.

Simone, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Florentine merchant, discovers that his wife, Bianca, is having an affair with Prince Guido Bardi. Guido and Bianca believe that they have nothing to fear until Simone challenges Guido to a duel and kills him. Simone's strength awakens Bianca's passion. "Why did you not tell me you were so strong?" Bianca sings to Simone. "Why did you not tell me you were so beautiful?" Simone responds.

The story probably hit a chord with Zemlinsky because his sister returned to her husband, composer Arnold Schoenberg, after having an affair with painter, Richard Gerstl, who subsequently committed suicide; and Zemlinsky never recovered from his own affair with Alma Schindler, who jilted him to marry Gustav Mahler.

The score sounded opulent -- from the prelude which introduced us to the two lovers, to the finale, when the duel between Simone and Guido caused the music to rise to a climax of dissonant harmony as Guido figuratively fell to his death during a descending glissando. All the drama was in the music, although as in a number of the presentations during the concert, the libretto and vocal music were far surpassed by the orchestration,

which sometimes didn't seem to be accompanying the singers at all. The voices and orchestra at times sounded incompatible.

No stranger to this work, Donnie Ray Albert recorded the part of Simone with the Cologne Philharmonic Orchestra in 2001 for EMI, with Conlon conducting. His singing was passionate and regal, and he was supported aptly by Pavlovskaya's warm-voiced Bianca and Anthony Dean Griffey's Guido.

Although the concert was unstaged, the singers, who were dressed in gowns and tails, did gravitate around the stage and return to their music stands, but their movements were manikinesque and almost reminded us of the singers in Robert Wilson's "Madama Butterfly" last season. They moved slowly in set patterns and didn't display much emotion. Simone and Bianca gazed into each other's eyes lovingly without ever touching. Thor Steingraber's direction contributed to making the evening somewhat monotonous, since the overall look was similar before intermission. The greatness of the music of these forgotten composers has yet to be determined. The projections weren't enough to sustain our interest, and the singers needed to be more animated.

The concert was clearly not about the staging or singing though. Its purpose was to introduce us to music that has been forgotten and is rarely heard. Conlon's mission is an honorable one. The evening was educational and enlightening, and we look forward to next season's fully staged productions of Ullmann's "Der zerbrochene Krug" and Zemlinsky's "Der Zwerg."

Conductor, James Conlon  
Staging, Thor Steingraber  
Projection Designer, Maiko Nezu  
Lighting Designer, Trevor Stirlin Burk  
Concertmaster, Stuart Canin