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A Night at The Broad Stage with Frederica von Stade and Jake Heggie: Sheer Beauty!



The Eli and Edythe Broad Stage, Santa Monica

‘Heggie abstains from beleaguering us with the experimental -- simply tantalizes us with it -- then brings us into the melodic lyricism of the romantic and feelings of the heart.’

**JAKE HEGGIE, ETC.
FREDERICA VON STADE RECITAL
THE BROAD STAGE
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By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

Okay, so I’m winging it. I lost my performance program and had no intentions of writing a review, so let’s just call this a brief opinion piece to show my exuberance for having heard Frederica von Stade open the newly constructed Eli and Edythe Broad Stage at Santa Monica College in sunny -- often windy, often overcast, often cooler than the rest of Los Angeles – California, near the movie colony in Malibu.

Yes, the new Westside theater did have a movie star in attendance. Dustin Hoffman,

chairman of the theater's artistic advisory board, introduced the main event in a relaxed jovial fashion, making us realize that he was just as excited to be there as we were. His partner in crime, artistic director Dale Franzen, had a monumental dream 10 years ago, and she made it happen. With no Carnegie Hall in Los Angeles, this 499-seat theater is already becoming a landmark. And I might add: the acoustics are stupendous. You can sit anywhere and hear.

Let me begin with my undying praise to composer-pianist Jake Heggie. As all of our readers know, we at OperaOnline.us have bemoaned many a new modern composer. Countless commentaries have been written about the lack of a melodic line in today's new contemporary works. True, many believe that this is the era of atonal music. Many of us feel disdain for it but are forced to live with the inevitable. My belief has always been that the atonal trend exists because most composers are unable to come up with the melodic goods. Finally – Finally – Jake Heggie shows us that there is a talent among us who can. True, some of his music is creative and unique unto itself, with staccato phrases and intonations that spark a new energy. The music is listenable and the text serves to peak our sensibilities. Heggie abstains from beleaguering us with the experimental -- simply tantalizes us with it -- then brings us into the melodic lyricism of the romantic and feelings of the heart. Sheer beauty! A hush comes over the audience. And we realize that there is hope for new music such as his, which will remain in the canons of history. My favorite Heggie portion was devoted to mothers and daughters. In August 2007, duets for soprano and mezzo-soprano with piano poetry were introduced in honor of the Steans Institute for Young Artists at the Ravinia Festival. Now once again, this time for the opening of the Broad Stage, Heggie's "Facing Forward/Looking Back" took center stage, sung by renowned mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade and the young effervescent soprano, Kristin Clayton.

"Let it go. Let it out of your heart. . . . There's so much to be living for and so many other people to give to."

Von Stade sang "Facing Forward" with the artistic feeling only she can deliver. We were touched.

But that was after we'd heard Clayton sing the Southern California premiere of Heggie's "At the Statue of Venus," with a libretto by Terrence McNally – the story of a woman in a museum waiting to meet the man of her dreams. It was like watching a one-woman show set to music. Very effective and with moments of comedy, pathos and melodic delight, the piece was commissioned in 2005 by Opera Colorado to celebrate the opening of the Ellie Caulkins Opera House. Heggie's ability to compose for voice is consistently evident, a welcome relief from the barrage of film-score composers who are attempting to cross over into opera, but write only the orchestral components with any measure of success.

Kristin Clayton is a gifted young singer with much promise, but she still wasn't able to reach the depths of the master beside her. There is only one Frederica von Stade, and this theater did the mezzo-soprano justice. First she sang of roses. Among her selections was

the delicately sung Schubert Lied, “Heidenröslein” – Goethe’s poetic story of the poor little rose being picked from the vine, which she sang with the delicacy of a swirling humming bird. “La Vie en Rose” held us spellbound as von Stade brought her own Parisian style as a chanteuse to bear. “Charmante” – she segued into songs of Paris -- en français. Having lived in France for a year after graduating from high school, she’d heard soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf in recital, and her affinity for the French repertoire took flight. Whether describing the story behind the song “Bois de Boulogne” by speaking in English, or singing it in French, von Stade’s elegance is evident; and when she sings the piece, her delicacy of tone gleams through her interpretation, and each tone manifests itself as part of a complete picture. True artistry.

Allowing us to see her spiritual side, von Stade sang Leonard Bernstein’s “Greeting,” Virgil Thomson’s “A Prayer to St. Catherine” (with text by Kenneth Koch), and Francis Poulenc’s “Priez pour paix” (with text by Charles D’Orléans). She was Clayton’s sister while singing the Dorabella-Fiordiligi duet “Ah guarda sorella” from “Così fan tutte,” and the two sang a lovely rendition of the “Flower Duet” from “Lakmé.” The concert concluded with Bernstein’s “Take Care of This House,” with text by Alan Jay Lerner – a fitting tribute to the longevity of the new theater.

If I were to make one criticism, I would ask for a more climactic ending. I’m sure that von Stade will grace the Broad Stage with her refined elegance soon again. I have only one request when she does. An encore, please! Indulge us so that we can express our appreciation. But then maybe we were all anxious to taste the sushi and pasta at the afterparty.

Von Stade and Clayton will sing Heggie’s “Three Decembers” -- formerly known as “Last Acts” – for San Francisco Opera and Cal Performances in December.
Pianist: Jake Heggie



Frederica von Stade Photo:Robert Miller