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Los Angeles Opera's 'Recovered Voices' makes its audience think.



Mary Dunleavy, Rodrick Dixon. Photo by Robert Millard.

**ULLMANN -- ZEMLINSKY
RECOVERED VOICES
LOS ANGELES OPERA
MARCH 8, 2008**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

Los Angeles Opera began its "Recovered Voices" project last season, bringing to light some of the composers persecuted during the Nazi era, whose music has since become lost and forgotten. Music Director James Conlon's enthusiasm to make "Recovered Voices" an annual event immediately attracted gifts from a number of Jewish donors, including \$3.25 million from philanthropist Marilyn Ziering.

If money does in fact talk, it certainly did on March 8 in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

Both staged productions – Viktor Ullmann’s “Der zerbrochene Krug” and Alexander Zemlinsky’s “Der Zwerg” -- were meticulously conceived and produced, with beautiful, tasteful scenery and costuming.

“DER ZERBROCHENE KRUG”

Ullmann’s “Krug,” based on a play by Heinrich von Kleist in 1808, centers around a jug which has been broken and finding the guilty party, who is none other than the judge at the trial (Adam), who broke the jug while attempting to seduce the young woman (Eve) whose mother (Marthe) wants compensation for the damages. The mother thinks that the culprit is her daughter’s fiancé (Ruprecht), but at the end, the judge’s guilt is uncovered.

It is all done in a jovial fashion that makes us reflect on the Biblical Adam and Eve and the apple. The broken jug represents the apple with a bite taken out of it. Once the jug has been broken, Eve and her family’s reputation are tainted.

Ullmann composed “Der zerbrochene Krug” after the Nazis took over Prague. He was deported to the Terezín concentration camp shortly after its completion in 1942, and died in Auschwitz in 1944. The opera satirizes the corruptness of the Nazi justice system.

In L.A. Opera’s production, which had its final performance on March 8, we saw a silhouette of the jug during the overture, and then we watched dancers depict how the jug was broken. The onstage action may have detracted from our attention to the music, but it was creative theater at its best. It was like watching a silent film with a musical accompaniment. And then when the set was in full view, the red lighting, buildings and windmills perfectly represented the Dutch town where the characters lived.

The cast of young singers was excellent. Bass Steven Humes’s Walter, the district judge, sang with a stand-out mellow timbre and looked and acted the role to perfection. The word “mellow” also describes the quality of mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Bishop’s voice, which gave her the maturity to enact Eve’s troubled mother with believability. Baritone James Johnson’s Adam was always in character. His comedic talent kept us watching and enjoying. Adler Fellow Melody Moore was a dazzling Eve and is a soprano to watch. Tenor Bonaventura Bottone was an absolute delight as the court clerk, Licht. His acting ability is his forté. And Rena Harms’s First Maid was adorable as she flitted around the stage with exuberance. The remainder of the ensemble cast worked well together. And I just loved the ballet.

“Der zerbrochene Krug” is a short one-act opera reminiscent of Puccini’s “Gianni Schicchi” in flavor, length and style. There are moments of Richard Wagner’s “Die Meistersinger” in it, Kurt Weill’s “Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny,” and the harmonies of Richard Strauss. But it is definitely the music of an individualistic composer whose life was cut short.

“DER ZWERG”

Although Alexander Zemlinsky’s “Der Zwerg” is based on Oscar Wilde’s “The Birthday of the Infanta,” it is autobiographical. Zemlinsky -- a short, unattractive man -- never

recovered when Alma Schindler left him for Gustav Mahler. He was therefore compelled to compose “Der Zwerg,” which premiered in 1922, with a libretto by Georg C. Klaren.

Briefly, the Sultan gives the Spanish Infanta, Donna Clara, a grotesque-looking dwarf as a birthday present. The girl leads the Dwarf on, presents him with a rose, and he subsequently falls in love with her, unaware of his own appearance. When the Dwarf finally sees his reflection in the mirror, he is devastated and begs the Infanta to love him, but she refuses, explaining that she prefers to toy with him as if he were a pet animal rather than love him like a man. The Dwarf dies of a broken heart.

The story is a tragic one. When tenor Rodrick Dixon cried out after seeing his face in the mirror for the first time, my heart felt the depth of his emotion. He played the Dwarf with the intensity necessary to communicate his overwhelming, heart-rending devastation. Unfortunately, his voice lacked the power of his emotional range. Dixon sang his heart out, but at times, his voice seemed to be in another room, even when the voice of the soprano standing next to him projected easily into the hall.

The soprano, Mary Dunleavy, played the Infanta with spice, charm and the insincerity required of the role. Her voice was strong, but some of her higher tones were somewhat strident and unpleasing. More roundness and warmth in her voice would add to her vocal timbre.

James Johnson was an effective Don Estoban; Susan B. Anthony, a caring and sympathetic Ghita; and Melody Moore, Lauren McNeese, Elizabeth Bishop, Karen Vuong and Rena Harms added to the ensemble.

The gold-toned set was lavish and wonderful, with elaborate chandeliers, arched doorways, and a unique mural patterned after a Diego Velazquez masterpiece. The period hooped gowns contributed to the onstage majestic opulence.

The music was at times Wagnerian; at other times, we heard the waltz-like lyricism of Strauss. The orchestral score was richer than its vocal counterpart. Maestro Conlon’s affinity for the music was evident in his dynamic musical direction.

In conclusion: I cannot help but note that this Dwarf was hardly short or inferior-looking. A hump on his back and an enacted clumsy gait made the character viable. A shorter, more grotesque-looking dwarf might have been more believable. I therefore question the casting of the Dwarf, even though the audience seemed to be enthralled with him.

James Conlon has given us much to think about and analyze. And next season, there will be more.

Conductor, James Conlon
Director, Darko Tresnjak
Set Designer, Ralph Funicello
Costume Designer, Linda Cho

Lighting Designer, David Weiner
Choreographer, Peggy Hickey
Los Angeles Opera Concert Master, Stuart Canin
Associate Conductor/Chorus Master, Grant Gershon