

Article published Aug 21, 2016

The Lowe Down: It's good theater, but is it opera?

By Jim Lowe

The Lowe Down

Vermonters have recently been treated to two entertaining and compelling contemporary musical theater pieces, both described as opera. But are they?

Central Vermont's Scrag Mountain Music introduced "The Diaries of Adam and Eve," a setting of Mark Twain stories by Marshfield composer Evan Premo, Aug. 5-7 at Randolph's Chandler Music Hall and Phantom Theater in Warren. The next weekend, the Vermont Opera Project made its debut with "Orpheus & Euridice," in a unique setting of the legend by New York musical theater composer Ricky Ian Gordon, in the unrestored depths of Proctor's Vermont Marble Museum.

"The Diaries of Adam and Eve" was a two-act duet between Adam and Eve, from their beginnings in the Garden of Eden to the results of their expulsion, including the death of their son, Abel, at the hands of his brother Cain. There was plenty of Twain's famed wit, but also a Twain morality and humanity lesson.

Premo's opera was premiered in Michigan in 2010, also with contributions from his Scrag Mountain co-artistic director and wife, soprano Mary Bonhag, baritone Matthew Patrick Morris and the Aeolus String Quartet, as the entire cast. Staged by Edwin Cahill, a theater director, the action was simple but definitely and effectively theater.

Conversely, Premo's music was far more complex than Broadway-style musical theater. Eve's lines were lyrical and expressive, and Adam's a bit more "masculine" and rough sounding, but the string accompaniment was much more harmonically complex; modern if you will. This was decidedly opera, albeit far from grand.

"Orpheus & Euridice" was a decidedly different kind of opera. Gordon's score uniquely calls for soprano (Euridice), clarinet (Orpheus) and piano, which for this production was expanded to piano and string quintet. And four dancers were added as an active Greek chorus. And the staging, though rustic and rough-hewn, was opera-sophisticated.

Soprano Suzanne Kantorski, a Vermont native who performs around the world, sang her part of the dialogue, while the excellent Waterbury clarinetist Wesley Christiansen responded with his speech-like lyrical lines on clarinet, with both conversational and dramatic results. Gordon's harmonic language was more musical theater than contemporary classical, but his demands on Kantorski were decidedly operatic.

And, though the venue, an unrestored manufacturing room, was the furthest thing from an opera house, Liliana Duque Piñero's stylish staging was decidedly operatic, with its winding wooden path through the very gray and surreal surroundings. And the action was not only directed by Keturah Stickann, it was choreographed by her to become a hybrid of theater, opera and dance. It was fascinating.

Premo and Bonhag's Scrag Mountain Music has been bringing professional chamber music to their Montpelier-area community since 2011, frequently mixing and matching genres. This was the first production of the Vermont Opera Project, led by North Clarendon opera professionals Quincy and Jeff Bruckerhoff.

Both are young couples, accomplished professionals, representing a willingness to cross genre and stylistic lines to create art that is compelling to broader and younger audiences. What is important as that they have done this, not by diluting the art, but by expanding its possibilities.

These new approaches, rather than killing great opera like Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" and Puccini's "La bohème," will help expand their audiences to the next generation. More importantly, they will result in new and compelling art.

Jim Lowe is music and theater critic and arts editor of The Times Argus and Rutland Herald, and can be reached at jim.lowe@rutlandherald.com or jim.lowe@timesargus.com.