

REVIEW

The Medium

NEW YORK CITY

Chelsea Opera
November 10, 2011

Chelsea Opera offered an inspired beginning to its eighth season with Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Medium*, performed in Chelsea's St. Peter's Church (seen Nov. 10).

Given its premiere in 1946, *The Medium* has remained one of Menotti's most popular works. Arguably his darkest opera, *The Medium* was inspired by the composer/librettist's reactions to attending a séance. His personal disappointment in the chicanery of the séance, and his observation of the contrasting solace the ceremony instilled in his fellow attendees, inspired Menotti to create an impressive short opera that depicted, simultaneously, cynicism and gullibility, hopefulness and insanity.

Chelsea Opera's opening-night performance was graced with a very strong cast. The dramatic weight of *The Medium* squarely rests on the shoulders of the title character, Madame Flora (Baba). Judith Skinner gave an astonishing portrayal: her powerful contralto gave her a commanding presence, and her sense of pitch and phrasing remained confident and sure as Baba's dissolve into madness led her into progressively more dissonant and fragmented music. Skinner proved to be a fine actress as well, one who did not shrink from the ever-increasing challenges of the role. This is an exciting young singer.

Her colleagues were also first-rate. As Monica, Kate Oberjat elicited sympathy for her trials as Baba's daughter and accomplice in deception, as well as tenderness in her love for the mute orphan Toby (here depicted by Aaron Berk). Oberjat's rendition of "The Black Swan" was quite lovely. The minor roles of séance patrons Mr. & Mrs. Gobineau (Brian Henry and Meredith Buchholtz) and Mrs. Nolan (Caroline Tye) were handled with appropriately understated aplomb. The beauty of Laura Alley's stage direction lay in its unassuming naturalness. This approach greatly enhanced the opera's dramatic impact. Carmine Aufiero led the cast and the excellent orchestral ensemble in a taut, well-focused performance. □

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