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# OPERA NEWS

## *A Distant Love: Songs of John and Abigail Adams*

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Chelsea Opera

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The deep love shared by John and Abigail Adams is well documented by the many letters the two wrote to each other over the course of their courtship and married life. Composer Gary S. Fagin and librettist Terry Quinn's new two-act opera based on this relationship, *A Distant Love: Songs of John and Abigail Adams*, charts the long separation the two endured, from the time John spent as an ambassador in Amsterdam through most of the Revolutionary War. The work — which features a cast of only two singers (John, a baritone, and Abigail, a soprano) — was given its Manhattan premiere by Chelsea Opera in the chancel of Christ and Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church on Friday, June 14.

The opera is organized in three sections — a prologue depicting John's departure from home; an act devoted to John's writing to Abigail while he is in Amsterdam (this act was originally commissioned in 2004 by the John Adams Institute and performed at Amsterdam's Concertgebouw by baritone Richard Lalli in 2005); and a second act depicting Abigail's life in Braintree, Massachusetts, while awaiting her husband's return. Interestingly, the first, earlier-commissioned act is the weaker of the two. The libretto contains few points of significant interest (it covers horseback riding, ice skating, homesickness) and the score meanders through the material without ever making much of an impact. Abigail's act, on the other hand, addresses much more engaging issues — the horrors of war, women's place in society, scarcity of food and supplies during wartime, smallpox, slavery, etc. The music is also more clearly structured into "song" segments, interspersed with Abigail's candid spoken reflections about her relationship with John, which further draw the audience into her world.

Baritone Peter Kendall Clark gave an admirable portrayal of John Adams. Although his voice initially sounded a bit rough, it soon warmed up and remained clear and strong for the entirety of the act. In addition to solid vocalism and crisp diction, Clark brought an expressive face and requisite abandon to his performance; it must have been a challenge to pull off galloping around the stage while straddling a cane and singing "shaking on horseback" repeatedly, but he somehow managed it. Despite Clark's efforts, however, John Adams proved an essentially thankless role, as the opera truly came to life only in its more dynamic Act II.

As Abigail, soprano Victoria Tralongo gave a superb performance that made one forget almost entirely about the few vocal issues that cropped up along the way. The music occasionally demanded more than Tralongo could provide in the middle and lower registers of her voice, resulting in either a pressed, hollow sound in the middle or an excessively chesty quality at the bottom. When allowed to sing a lyric, legato line, however, she created some truly gorgeous sounds, her quick vibrato shimmering as her voice soared easily into the church. There were a number of poignant moments, yet Tralongo also made the most of Abigail's wry sense of humor, particularly with some amusingly frank comments on topics ranging from man's desire to rule as a tyrant over his wife, to the sublime ecstasy of eating chocolate. Tralongo's strong dramatic instincts allowed her to paint a convincing portrait of a woman dutifully fulfilling her responsibilities to her family and community, all the while subverting her own understandable frustrations in order to provide moral support to her husband.

In addition to the two singers, *A Distant Love* is scored for string quartet, and the group assembled for this production was only satisfactory. There were many instances of imprecise intonation and ragged ensemble, which made it difficult at times to comprehend the score. The singers seemed miraculously unfazed by this unsteadiness, performing throughout with commitment and confidence. Conductor Jorge Parodi often cued the vocal entrances with sharp intakes of breath, thereby allowing the singers to avoid looking into the pit too often — a technique that worked fairly well in the intimate space.

Director Lynne Hayden-Findlay, a cofounder of Chelsea Opera with Leonarda Priore, made excellent use of the church's deep chancel: as the main action unfolded in the front area, the rear portion served as a second "room" in which the non-singing character would go about his/her daily business — sweeping the floor, reading letters, etc. The costumes and minimal set did a fine job of setting the time and location, while the atmospheric lighting clearly marked the passage of time and seasons. □

DEREK GRETEN-HARRISON (8/28/13)