

The Face on the Barroom Floor & Emperor Norton

NEW YORK CITY

Chelsea Opera

11/7/14

Chelsea Opera opened its eleventh season on November 7 and 8 with two one-act operas by composer Henry Mollicone and librettist John S. Bowman — *The Face on the Barroom Floor* (1978) and *Emperor Norton* (1981). Mollicone performed as both pianist and conductor for these performances, which took place in Chelsea Opera's long-time home, St. Peter's Church in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood.

The Face on the Barroom Floor, Mollicone's third opera, was commissioned by Central City Opera. Such has been the success of this work that Central City presented it in thirty-three consecutive seasons. It is a solid work, inspired by the poem of Hugh Antoine d'Arcy. Since the poem involves one brief scene, Mollicone and Bowman had to create a more complex scenario. They settled on one that brings supernatural elements into the story, in which the action repeats itself over about a century of time. Mollicone writes in a tonal idiom. His music, while not very adventurous, is well crafted, shapely and not at all trite. Bowman's libretto keeps things moving forward. Soprano Molly Mustonen, tenor Benjamin Robinson and baritone John Callison all provided musically strong, dramatically satisfying performances.

Joshua Abraham Norton was perhaps San Francisco's most famous nineteenth-century eccentric. Norton was a merchant who lost his fortune in a scheme to buy up vast quantities of rice to be shipped to and sold at high price in famine-ravaged China. Norton's business failure seems also to have cost him part of his grip on reality, as henceforth he declared himself "Emperor Norton I, Emperor of these United States and Protector of Mexico." Mollicone and Bowman drew upon the historical Norton's life as a springboard to their own opera. In *Emperor Norton* we find two aspiring actors, Diana and Michael, who have shown up for an audition to a play based upon Norton. The playwright, Marla, is baffled, as she is still hard at work on the play and not at all ready to hold auditions. However, she decides to have the actors read from completed scenes to test out her ideas. No sooner have they begun than they are interrupted by an intruder, who begins offering unsolicited criticism and advice. Since his ideas seem compelling and offer great insight, Marla and the actors begin to have confidence in him, despite his peculiar mannerisms and attire. They gradually succumb more and more to his narrations, and the play begins to take on life beyond anyone's expectations. It turns out that the intruder is none other than the ghost of Norton, and that it was he who sent the invitations to the actors.

Justin Ryan gave a winning portrayal of The Intruder. His character's departures into reverie were quite moving, and he caught exactly the right dramatic tone and did not overplay Norton's craziness — Ryan made Norton lovable even when Ryan was trying to secure the rice deal. Vira Slywotzky brought Marla, the playwright, vividly to life. She managed beautifully to balance Marla's indignant defensiveness with growing compassion for Norton. She seemed fully rapt when Norton would fly off into ecstatic flights of reminiscence. David Gordon showed tremendous dramatic versatility as Michael, the actor, who must tackle humorous roles such as the snooty waiter and menacing roles such as the ship's captain who swindles Norton out of his money. As Diana, soprano Rosa Betancourt had fewer opportunities to shine, but was a radiant presence when those moments arose.

Emperor Norton is a more complex and sophisticated opera, both in its music and libretto, than is *The Face on the Barroom Floor*. Heard in tandem, as in the Chelsea Opera production, the earlier work comes across as a study piece for the latter. Both plots involve the supernatural. The music, while more elaborate in *Norton*, speaks from the same steady stylistic palette. Either opera would have a much more powerful impact if pared with a work of greater contrast. And while both works were appealing, their beauty was diminished by too great a similarity between them. □

ARLO MCKINNON