



Sunday, November 13, 2011

Medium-rare and Well-done

Gian Carlo Menotti's darkest opera "The Medium" is RAREly done and was WELL-DONE by the Chelsea Opera at St. Peter's Church. This is not the most comfortable venue for audience members, what with the hard wooden pews and poor sight-lines, but none of that mattered when Maestro Carmine Aufiero picked up his baton. He led his 14 musicians through Menotti's interesting score, notable for its harmonic dissonance wedded to an innate lyricism that effectively parallels the emotional language of the singers. Listening is an altogether eerie experience suitable to a ghost story.

The story is compact with no subplots and the opera lasts under two hours including intermission. That is just the right amount of time to illustrate the mental decompensation of the (anti)heroine, one Madame Flora who runs phony seances. Once she begins to have tactile and auditory hallucinations she turns to religion and refunds her clients' money.

At Saturday night's performance the title role was performed by mezzo Mary Clare McAlee who gave her all vocally and dramatically; she was totally believable in her descent from general meanness into paranoia and madness.

As the daughter whom she bullies into assisting at the seances, the lovely soprano Rachel Sitomer sang beautifully but was not always intelligible. This may be due to the difficulties of singing English in the upper registers but one longed for either better diction or the presence of surtitles. Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau were sung by soprano Susan Holsonbake and baritone Giuseppe Spoletini. They sang well and were quite affecting as a couple trying to contact their long-dead little boy. Mezzo Patrice P. Eaton was equally affecting as a mother wanting desperately to believe that the white robed figure of Monica was the teenage daughter she lost. One of the major plot points is the gullibility of the bereaved who want more seances, even when Madame Flora tells them of her fraudulence.

The one character that failed to convince was the role of Toby, a mute gypsy boy that Madame Flora had taken in and then exploited, beat, and finally killed. It may have been his appearance that defied believability or perhaps it is very difficult to act without the use of the voice, but one should experience Toby's death at the end as devastating, especially since Monica and he are in love. But the chemistry between the two of them just wasn't evident.

The production was effectively directed by Laura Alley whose work is always superb; the actors seemed to move comfortably about the stage and their "stage business" always seemed connected to the lyrics. The simple set and lighting by Joshua Rose and Michael Megliola made the most of the limited playing area of the church. Costume design by Lynne Hayden-Findlay was true to the period of the story, the 1940's. One cannot help but think of Stephen Schwartz' "Seance on a Wet Afternoon" performed last season at New York City Opera. What will be next, vampire operas? Stay tuned.