

Ballymore (Part 1): Winners & Pizza con Funghi

NEW YORK CITY

Chelsea Opera 10/11/13

Chelsea Opera opened its 2013–14 season in sensational style with an engaging pair of one-act operas — Richard Wargo's *Ballymore (Part 1): Winners* and Seymour Barab's *Pizza con Funghi*. Both works featured the same cast of four singers, directed by Chelsea Opera co-founder Lynne Hayden-Findlay. The performances took place on October 11 and 12, in the company's usual home, St. Peter's Church in Manhattan.

In the late 1990s, Richard Wargo contacted the great Irish playwright Brian Friel with a proposal to adapt the latter's 1967 play *Lovers* into an opera. The two men met, and Friel gave his consent for Wargo to create an adaptation as an opera libretto. In 1999, Milwaukee's Skylight Opera Theatre presented the world premiere of the entire work, and the opera was recorded by PBS for a 2000 broadcast. In 2010, *Winners*, part one of the complete opera, was presented at Ireland's Wexford Festival. (Part two, *Losers*, is to be presented there in a couple of weeks.) Chelsea Opera's staging marks the opera's Manhattan premiere.

Winners offers the story of Mag and Joe, a young student couple from the town of Ballymore. Mag is in the early stages of an unplanned pregnancy, so she and Joe are facing the prospect of a quick marriage. An overshadowing cloud is anxiety over the implications of the pregnancy and marriage upon the lofty plans Joe nurtures of getting a college degree and having a career that allows him to live in London or some other major city. Samantha Britt portrays Mag as a sparkling, playful young woman whose impish side regularly runs head-first into her deep and shattering anxieties about the pregnancy and Joe's commitment to her. Chad Kranak depicts Joe as a complex mixture of aloofness and studious detachment, coupled with a deep, abiding and nervous love for Mag. We see their struggles in their colossal fights and tender reconciliations. Both singers were remarkable, fully capturing the audience's love and empathy. One of the most exceptional compositional feats that Wargo accomplishes is to create a work that, while tragic, never loses its warmth and reassurance. As has been my experience in the past, the acoustic in St. Peter's makes it difficult at times to decipher the singers clearly, despite the finest efforts at balance as conducted by Steven M. Crawford. Fortunately, most of the opera was lightly scored. This problem was further diminished by virtue of the structure of the opera, specifically in the use of two ballad-singers — Darcy Dunn (the Woman) and Robert Balonek (the Man), here made up to look more like Titania and Oberon than like balladeers — who acted as narrators of the story proper to a recitative-tinged accompaniment. The opera and its performance made one eager to hear the entire work, hopefully as cleverly staged and well performed as Hayden-Findlay's production.

Seymour Barab, one of our country's true musical wonders, began his career as an organist at age fourteen. He later took up the cello and in the 1950s was a founding member of the famous Composers' String Quartet, an ensemble devoted to the music of contemporary composers. Largely self-taught as a composer, Barab continues to compose prolifically at the age of ninety-three. He has shown a great flair for comedy and parody, and his 1988 opera *La Pizza con Funghi* is a classic example of both. This one-act vehicle is a loving and delightful spoof on virtually all the conventions of Italian opera, from the opera seria of the eighteenth century through Verdi and the verismo stylings of Puccini, Leoncavallo and others. Our four singers here jumped from the more subdued and serious demands of Wargo's *Winners* to a madcap, virtuoso performance of a perfect opera buffa. This charming and hilarious work, emotively conducted by Samuel McCoy, had great appeal both to old opera hands and to first-time operagoers. It made a perfect foil to *Winners*. □

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