

The Tender Land

NEW YORK CITY

Chelsea Opera

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In mid-June, Manhattan's Chelsea Opera presented a lovely production of Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land*, an opera first heard just over sixty years ago when New York City Opera offered its world premiere under the baton of Thomas Schippers (and the direction of Jerome Robbins).

Set in Kansas in 1930, *The Tender Land* combines the charms of rural Americana with a tale of innocence lost. Chelsea Opera is to be commended for its casting — all the major roles were superbly represented. As Laurie Moss, a young woman on the eve of high school graduation, Joanie Brittingham fully captured the youthful freshness and naiveté of her character, yet also showed noted dramatic versatility in her depiction of Laurie falling in love with Martin and in her angry confrontation with Grandpa Moss. Leonarda Priore was excellent as Ma Moss. She made us empathize with Ma's bitter resignation about her own life and her desperate hopefulness for her two daughters. Most impressive of all was her rendition at Laurie's pre-graduation party of "Long Time Ago," a song that is not part of Copland's libretto, but which was added to give flavor to the Chelsea production. For this number Priore shifted from an operatic vocal style to a simple homespun manner of an unschooled singer, creating a lyrical, sincerely tender performance of the song. Chad Kranake's portrayal of the drifter Martin appropriately built and then receded in power in accordance with his rapport with Laurie. His lyrical eloquence in "Tomorrow you'll be graduating", in which he expresses his love for Laurie, was a highlight of the performance. Steven Fredericks made an imposing impression as Grandpa Moss, and Peter Kendall Clark added a level of menace as Martin's fellow-drifter, Top.

As always, St. Peter's Church proved to be an acoustically challenging space, in which it is often difficult to balance the singers and the orchestra. Even in Murray Sidlin's sensitive, lightly-scored chamber-orchestra reduction, audibility remained a problem. That stated, music director Samuel McCoy led the cast and fine instrumental ensemble in a stirringly vital performance, bringing Chelsea Opera's 2013–14 season to a triumphant conclusion. □

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