



Chad Kranak as 'Martin' - Photo Credit Robert J. Saferstein

[Art Leonard Observations](#) By Arthur S. Leonard June 15, 2014

Chelsea Opera presented two performances of Aaron Copland's opera, "The Tender Land," at St. Peter's Church on West 20th Street in... of course... Chelsea (Manhattan). I attended the second performance, a matinee on June 14.

Copland collaborated with several people on this piece, but ultimately the librettist was identified as Horace Everett. It was written to be a television production, but when that fell through he adapted it for opera house presentation and the New York City Opera presented the premiere in 1954. Copland scored the music for a full opera house pit orchestra, but the piece works best as chamber opera and Murry Sidlin arranged the score for the same 13-instrument ensemble that Copland had originally used for his ballet *Appalachian Spring*. The scoring is certainly appropriate, since this piece is definitely a soul mate to the ballet, written in Copland's Americana style.

The story is a small-scale slice of mid-Western life from between the world wars, insular farm people tested a bit by the intrusion of some wandering men looking for work. The musical highlights include the finale of Act I, frequently excerpted as a choral piece, "The Promise of Living," the barn dance music in Act II, and some love music culminating in a duet in Act III. The piece has never really held the stage, because Copland did not solve the riddle of writing a dramatic opera. There are static stretches, and the overall dramatic effect is underwhelming. On the other hand, there is much very beautiful music. Although one can hear the best of it in the orchestral suite Copland excerpted from the opera, the suite doesn't really get much concert play, and some of the music is best heard as originally conceived with voices in the mix. So one is grateful for the opportunity to hear it, especially in a production put together with such love as this one by Chelsea Opera.

The reduced orchestration worked well in this setting, a relatively small church sanctuary that was resonant without distorting the voices and instrumental strands. Indeed, the small string body sounded quite rich — so rich at times that it was occasionally a struggle to hear the singers. This was a production that could have used surtitles. Although they were singing in English, the rich-sounding orchestra and the occasional high-flying vocal lines made comprehension difficult at times.

The cast were all at least competent, and some rose above that level, particularly Chad Kranak as Martin and Joanie Brittingham as Laurie. Their love music in the third act was particularly effective, as was Kranak's lead in to the Act I closer, when he first had a real chance to cut loose. Chelsea Opera co-founder Leonarda Priore was very effective as Ma Moss in terms of her acting, a bit less so in terms of the singing, with some questionable intonation and difficulty being heard at times over the orchestra. Peter Kendall Clark as Top was sonorous and the easiest to follow in terms of comprehension of the text. Rounding out the leads, Steven Fredericks as Grandpa Moss was very present, but I found the singing a bit stiff rhythmically.

Lynne Hayden-Findlay, the other co-founder of the company, was in charge of the staging, which was creditably done in the rather squeezed space. The barn dance scene of Act II was very crowded — indeed, looked uncomfortably so — but that goes with the territory. She needed that many bodies on the stage to present the dance numbers and fill in the choral bits.

Samuel McCoy's conducting was fluent and nuanced, but he might have figured out a way to restrain his musicians a bit in light of the difficulties of projection for some of his singers.

On balance, this was a very satisfactory rendition of a piece worth reviving from time to time, if only to remind ourselves of the bits of really gorgeous music and the genuine sentiment of its homely story. And the dance music in Act II is a real toe-topper that should be squarely in the pops concert repertory. For an excellent purely instrumental version, hunt for Copland conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra in a fine performance coupled with the orchestral suite from *Appalachian Spring* — an original RCA stereo recording from the LP era that has been in and out of the CD catalogue in various configurations.

Chelsea Opera presents a good mix of new and revival works and deserves support, especially with the disappearance of NYC Opera. The possibility to hear opera at affordable prices now devolves on the smaller opera companies, and we need to support them with our donations and our patronage.