

Music Opera Review

Drifters Look for Work; One of Them Finds Love

Copland's 'The Tender Land' Is Revived by Chelsea Opera

By ZACHARY WOOLFE - JUNE 16, 2014



The Tender Land Joanie Brittingham and Chad Kranak in this opera at St. Peter's Church. Photo Credit Robert J. Saferstein

For all of the dearly departed New York City Opera's contributions to American culture, the 30 or so new operas it presented were never really among them. Seen Gian Carlo Menotti's "The Most Important Man" or Thea Musgrave's "The Voice of Ariadne" lately? Neither have I.

While Aaron Copland's "The Tender Land," which received a rare revival on Friday and Saturday from Chelsea Opera, was first performed by City Opera in 1954, it wasn't originally conceived for that company. Commissioned by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the League of Composers, the opera was intended for television.

Only after being rejected by NBC was the work taken up by City Opera. Jerome Robbins directed, Thomas Schippers conducted, and the bass-baritone Norman Treigle created the role of Grandpa Moss, an obstinate old farmer in the 1930s Midwest. Despite these illustrious talents, it received mixed reviews and settled into semi-obscure.

The arias get occasional hearings: a line from the longing [“Laurie’s Song”](#) provided the title for the soprano Dawn Upshaw’s 1998 solo disc, “The World So Wide.” But even a chamber arrangement unveiled in 1987 — the version performed at St. Peter’s Church on West 20th Street over the weekend — failed to transform the work’s fortunes.

Scrappy and ambitious, with a taste for recent and lesser-heard music, Chelsea Opera should be commended for giving “The Tender Land” an outing. Yet Saturday’s performance, while loving, didn’t disprove the old consensus about the opera. Studded with moments of arresting lyrical beauty, it never quite gets off the ground as a drama.

Inspired by “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,” Walker Evans and James Agee’s photojournalistic account of poor American sharecroppers, the work is a little bit Steinbeck and a little bit “Oklahoma!” Laurie, the headstrong elder daughter of the Moss family, is about to graduate from high school when two drifters, Martin and Top, arrive at the farm looking for work.

The men quickly show interest in Laurie, which concerns her mother, because there’s been a report of two men molesting girls in the area. Even though Martin and Top are quickly dissociated from the crime, Grandpa Moss is infuriated when Martin and Laurie fall for each other, and he orders the men away. The lovers plan to run off together, but Martin and Top eventually agree that the road is no place for a well-raised young woman. They abandon Laurie, who at the end is left to set off on her own.

If all this unfolds with rather too much efficiency, the score is soaring and sweet, in Copland’s “Appalachian Spring” mode, and it was played smoothly on Saturday by a small orchestra conducted by Samuel McCoy. Highlights among the cast were the soprano Joanie Brittingham, who sang Laurie with lucid diction, and the baritone Peter Kendall Clark, a resonant Top. The finest passage in the score is the aching quintet that closes the first act, and here the performance was at its finest, too: polished and eloquent.

Correction: June 17, 2014

An earlier version of a subheading with this review misspelled the composer’s surname. As the review correctly notes, he was Aaron Copland, not Copeland.

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