

## Yes, We are in Kansas



Photo Credit Robert Saferstein

Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land* premiered sixty years ago at the now defunct (and sorely missed) New York City Opera. If it has been performed since then we have missed it and are doubly glad that the Chelsea Opera decided to revive it for the final work of their tenth anniversary season. Originally written for television, its intimate nature makes it far more suitable to a small company like Chelsea Opera.

Like most 20th c. operas, it strikes us as a play with music--and what fine music it is indeed. With the impressive Maestro Samuel McCoy on the podium, the excellent Chelsea Opera Chamber Orchestra comprising thirteen musicians filled St. Peter's Church with Copland's accessible music. The score reduction is attributed to Murry Sidlin.

The opera was well cast with soprano Joanie Brittingham starring as the young Laurie Moss; her petite stature gave no evidence of the substantial size of her voice but went a long way toward convincing us that she was perhaps 18 years old and about to graduate high school. She successfully colored her voice to sound young and then (spoiler alert) added more mature coloration when she stands up to her possessive family and leaves home for the wider world outside the farm.

Her splendid performance was matched by tenor Chad Kranak in the role of Martin, an itinerant farmhand who stops by the farm and wins her heart. Mr. Kranak also has a lovely instrument and his love duets with Ms. Brittingham were, well, lovely. His "should I stay or should I go" ambivalence was well reflected in his singing and acting.

Accompanying Martin is his drifter buddy Top who is the "player" in that duo, always on the make, a less winning character perhaps but the voice of reality which Martin needs to hear. Baritone Peter Kendall Clark, often seen/heard at Chelsea Opera, did not pander to the audience but used his ample sound and dramatic presence to bring out every unlikable nuance of the character.

The production was anchored by mezzo Leonarda Priore, co-founder of Chelsea Opera, who totally convinced as Ma Moss who worries about her two daughters. We have heard Ms. Priore in recital but it is on the stage that her talent best expresses itself. We were moved by her aria (actually, a folk song) "Long Time Ago", sung with beauty and deep feeling. The piano accompaniment was done by polymath Assistant Conductor Dean William Buck, composer and conductor and co-founder of the excellent Brooklyn-based Loft Opera.

Another superb performance was delivered by bass Steven Fredericks as Grandpa Moss whose ample rumbly voice was perfectly expressive of the loving but controlling patriarch of this family, often making us wonder how they all have his name and why there is no father around.

In the role of the postman Mr. Splinters, tenor David Kellett fit right in with the Depression Era and the Midwestern locale. Only Evelyn Carr as younger sister Beth stood out as being stagey and actorish. The ensemble of friends and neighbors were excellent.

The libretto by Horace Everett is burdened by every *cliché* one could imagine from that time and place. Nonetheless, who could not identify with a young woman's coming of age, spreading her wings and leaving home for the world outside?

There were some special moments in the evening beside Ms. Priore's solo--a chorale "The Promise of Living" with tenor joined by soprano and then additional voices one by one was thrilling to hear.

The budget of Chelsea Opera is small (donations always welcome) and production values are modest. A picket fence and a table and a chair made up the set; a rocking chair on the porch would have made sense. More might have been done with the lighting to suggest the time of day but these are small quibbles. Costumes were rustled up from the TDF costume collection and were appropriate to time and place.

There is only one more performance today at 4:00 PM and there may still be a few tickets available. Last night the house was packed in spite of the deluge outside and the back-breaking pews inside. Bring a cushion!