

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/opera-philadelphias-festival-o18-review-arias-and-alzheimers-1538169100>

OPERA REVIEW

Opera Philadelphia's Festival O18 Review: Arias and Alzheimer's

In its second year using the festival format, the company shifted from premieres to unexpected star turns.



Martha (Marietta Simpson) and Danny (Frederica von Stade) PHOTO: DOMINIC M. MERCIER

By Heidi Waleson

Sept. 28, 2018 5:11 p.m. ET

Philadelphia

Many opera plots involve women losing their minds, but in “**Sky on Swings**,” which is having its world premiere at the Perelman Theater as part of Opera Philadelphia’s Festival O18, that process is no mere device. Composer Lembit Beecher and librettist Hannah Moscovitch have created a shattering musical and theatrical evocation of what it feels like to have Alzheimer’s disease. This was opera as real life: In a tour-de-force duo performance, two veteran mezzo-sopranos—Marietta Simpson as Martha, who is far gone in the disease, and Frederica von Stade as Danny, who knows what is happening to her and is in frantic denial—enacted the terror and confusion of not knowing where you are and, even worse, who you are. They were surrounded by the sounds of a murmuring ensemble of four Elders and an 11-member orchestra, led by Geoffrey McDonald, whose unsettled harmonies and repeated intervals poignantly captured the struggles of a mind trying to grasp what’s just out of reach. The 78-minute opera toggles between the distress of losing and the serenity of finding, as the two women, who meet in a care facility, help each other by sinking into a new, shared fantasy of identity.

Joanna Settle’s skillful direction played with the fluid boundaries between the real and the imagined; Andrew Lieberman’s blank-walled set, which represented both the care facility and the empty spaces of the mind, was decorated only with a neon light fixture, whose long squiggly shape and changing colors suggested the tangles of the brain. Tilly Grimes’s neutral-colored leisurewear, and Pat Collins’s clinical lighting intensified both the real and the surreal, and soprano Sharleen Joynt excelled as Winnie, Martha’s unhappy daughter, now forever shut out of her mother’s realm.

Laurent Pelly’s new production of Donizetti’s “**Lucia di Lammermoor**,” performed at the Academy of Music, had its own take about what this opera’s famous losing-your-mind scene is all about. From the moment that Brenda Rae, as a teenage Lucia, came bounding over the (slightly precarious) snow-covered hillock of Chantal Thomas’s bleak set in search of her clandestine lover, it was clear that Lucia was under extreme patriarchal duress. Trembling, drooping, mustering her strength to resist, she didn’t have a chance against her violent brother, Enrico (Troy Cook), her manipulative tutor, Raimondo (Christian Van Horn), or Arturo (Andrew Owens), the man they are forcing her to marry. Ms. Rae’s flexible soprano made Lucia’s Act I

warbling seem organic, a product of terror and struggle, rather than ornamental. Then, after having killed Arturo in their bridal chamber, she sounded truly liberated in the mad scene. Playing vocal tag with the eerie glass harmonica, lying on her back to sing a vocalise of erotic ecstasy, her voice bloomed with radiant allure, and Lucia was herself at last. Of course, she subsequently dies, but that's opera.

This production was all about darkness: Duane Schuler's Stygian lighting, Mr. Pelly's buttoned up, Victorian-shaped costumes, the gloomy backdrops of sky and walls, the tightly regimented movements of the chorus. The patriarchy put on an excellent vocal show. Even Lucia's lover, Edgardo, thrillingly sung by the bel canto powerhouse tenor Michael Spyres, doesn't get a pass: In this interpretation, Edgardo, like the rest of the men, thinks the tragedy is all about him. Conductor Corrado Rovaris led a buoyant, well-paced performance.

This is Opera Philadelphia's second year using the festival format. The first focused on premieres; O18 is full of unconventional star turns. The ambitious "Glass Handel" at the Barnes Foundation was devised by the countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, with the aid of a many high-profile collaborators, to complement his debut recording, "ARC." There's a lot happening simultaneously: on one platform, Mr. Costanzo performs nine selections by Philip Glass and George Frideric Handel, accompanied by two different orchestras (modern and period) led by Mr. Rovaris; on another, three dancers do athletic choreography by Justin Peck; videos play at one end of the long, narrow space; and the artist George Condo paints cubist-inspired faces in the center. Throughout the show's 66 minutes, a team of 24 "people movers," in a precisely patterned sequence, scoop up the 264 audience members, on their chairs, and shift them to new spots. The moves (three per spectator) give everyone a chance to experience each of the elements close up.

With no texts or translations provided, the installation renders the arias as pure, plotless music, with the visual elements adding layers to the emotions they evoke. For me, the sheer physicality of the dancers felt strongly connected with the muscular qualities in Mr. Costanzo's voice; all four artists were working hard to fly in their different realms. Still, Mr. Costanzo's expressive instrument contains multiple gradations of ferocity, pathos and humor, and his singing here was no exception. Hence, the other elements, especially the elaborate robes (by Calvin Klein's Raf Simons) that he stripped off one by one, seemed superfluous.

Finally, at the Theatre of Living Arts, which was set up like a cabaret onstage and off, soprano Patricia Racette bared her soul in Poulenc's "La voix humaine" (1958), in which a woman known only as Elle bids an anguished farewell to her lover, unheard at the other end of the telephone. Ms. Racette sang this monodrama, with French text by Jean Cocteau, like an fervent tidal wave, by turns furious, despairing, apologizing, begging and finally, shockingly, comforting the man who has left her; the piano accompaniment, performed by Christopher Allen, instead of the more usual orchestral version, made its pain especially intimate.



“La voix” was presented as Act II of full evening titled “**Ne Quittez Pas.**” In a prelude devised by director James Darrah and Mr. Allen, words and poems by Cocteau, Rilke and Apollinaire, and songs and piano pieces by Poulenc were crafted into a 50-minute scene of kinky sexual exploration. Actors Marc Bendavid and Mary Tuomanen, playing the decadent twins Paul and Lise from Cocteau’s “Les enfants terribles,” ensnare Le Jeune Homme, the excellent baritone Edward Nelson, and integrate him into their amusements. It was a creative way to get some more fabulous Poulenc music into the program; however, the suggestion that Le Jeune Homme might be the lover at the other end of Elle’s conversation seemed tenuous, and Ms. Racette’s performance, like Mr. Costanzo’s, could have stood on its own.

—*Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.*

Copyright ©2017 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.