

## Review

Ohio Light Opera: Cole Porter's *Silk Stockings* (July 19)

by Robert Rollin



Last Friday evening the Ohio Light Opera performed Cole Porter's 1955 Broadway musical, *Silk Stockings* in Freedlander Theater at The College of Wooster. The show jumps between Paris and Moscow to depict a love story between Stephen Canfield, a sophisticated and somewhat world-weary American theatrical agent, and Comrade Ninotchka Yaschenko, a Soviet apparatchik.

Yaschenko is sent to Paris to bring back famous Russian composer Peter Ilyich Boroff, who has overstayed his official visit. Canfield manages Boroff and also the dim-witted American diva Janice Dayton, who is in Paris to make an independent film about Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Canfield's plan is to use Boroff's communist party-approved *Ode to a Tractor* in the movie for \$50,000, and to take a large cut for his commission.

Porter and his librettists George S. Kaufman, Leueen McGrath, and Abe Burrows add three bumbling but good-natured Soviet agents, several other minor characters, and a troop of chorus girls to the Paris mix to create a frivolously amusing and complex entertainment. The creative team sets the clumsy comedy of errors against a charming love story that causes the audience to let its guard down. By adding his memorable songs and dances, Porter wraps the production in a glistening and joyful musical mishmash.

Baritone Nathan Brian, as Stephen Canfield, led the cast with strong stage presence and fine acting. He made Canfield's lightning bolt transformation from hard-boiled agent to love-struck suitor convincing. Though his voice was a bit gravelly in the low register, he carried off the part seamlessly and skillfully. He was especially good in Canfield's signature song, *All of You*.

Mezzo-soprano Sarah Best was believable as Ninotchka Yaschenko, suddenly transformed from icy ideologue to willing lover. Both she and Brian danced gracefully in their pairings, tossed off the famous duet, *Paris Loves Lovers*, and bantered in entertaining exchanges. Best had a sweet upper register. Unfortunately her bottom register had an artificial quality noticeable in the low-ranged role.

Mezzo-soprano Alexa Devlin portrayed well the egocentric, but effervescently clueless diva, Janice Dayton. Her two best song highlights were *Stereophonic Sound* and *Satin and Silk*. She was amusing when turning *War and Peace* into a bubbly musical about Napoleon and Josephine — particularly in the lively production number with the dancers.

Devlin's voice more resembled Ethel Merman's than an opera singer's, and her succession of brazenly revealing costumes added color.

Bass baritone Edward Hanlon was wonderful as Bibinski, leader of the three Russian agents. He has a gorgeous voice — perhaps the best one in the cast. Tenors Gregory La Montagne and Christopher Nelson both played their comedic roles well as his colleagues Ivanov and Brankov. When singing *Siberia*, the trio acted, sang, and danced with panache.

While the production had well-drilled choreography replete with attractive and nicely costumed dancers, the staging relied a bit too obviously on using a scrim to save on sets. It is also clear that if there were potential places for cuts in Act One, none were taken. The first act noticeably lasted over an hour and a half. Luckily the second act had better pacing and revived audience attention.

After a few exposed, ragged violin passages in the Overture, the orchestra did quite well, though the music was little more than a series of tunes. The Prelude to Act Two was better constructed and very well played. Porter gave lots of prominent parts to the trumpets who were more than equal to the task.

*Published on clevelandclassical.com July 22, 2013*