

## Oberlin Opera Theater: Du Yun's *Angel's Bone* at the Cat in the Cream Coffeehouse (Jan. 31)

by Nicholas Stevens



This month, a cast of students gave a genre-bending, violent new opera its Northeast Ohio premiere run at a coffee shop — and all five performances sold out in advance. The scenario may sound unlikely, but *Angel's Bone*, a chamber work with music by Du Yun and a libretto by Royce Vavrek, has exceeded expectations since its 2016 premiere.

On January 31, the Oberlin Opera Theatre debuted its production of *Angel's Bone*, winner of the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in Music Composition, in the Cat in the Cream Coffeehouse. This initial outing, a co-production with Cleveland Opera Theater's New Opera Works (NOW) Festival, featured a post-concert talkback session with cast members and production staff.

Set designer Laura Carlson-Tarantowski makes the most of the small space, placing a bathtub on the platform, a mockup of a suburban living room on the right, and the chamber orchestra flanking a doorway to the extreme left. Matthew Chamberlain directs the ensemble from the back of the room, achieving seamless coordination in a piece that could easily skew chaotic.

The ingenuity of the spatial arrangement became obvious Wednesday night when the eight-person chorus burst through the fire doors wearing choral robes, their backdrop uncannily white to imply the heaven from which they have descended. As their unsettled harmonies rose in volume, Mrs. X.E. (Alexis Reed), a housewife, strolled in pouting

from the opposite entrance to watch television, carrying nothing but a cutting board and — foreshadowing — a knife.



From this point, the story plays out over a continuous 80-minute span. Mr. X.E. (Shawn Roth) discovers a pair of angels who have landed in his compost heap, a “boy” (Nicholas Music) and a “girl” (Chloe Falkenheim). Having returned to earth to revisit mortal pleasures, the pair huddle in the bathtub. The violence begins when Mrs. X.E., spotting a commercial opportunity in all those divine feathers, hands Mr. X.E. the knife and commands, “Prune them.” To say that the scene that follows is *gut-wrenching* is to risk understating the true impact of this moment, which finds the chorus breaking sticks and shrieking while the angels sob. Eventually, the divine creatures escape with the help of the regretful Mr. X.E. His wife, thinking only of herself to the end, resolves to sell a twisted version of her story to the media.



Roth managed the transition from compliance to self-annihilating mercy with grace, his rich, flexible baritone at first devoid of emotion but, by the end, trembling with horror. Both Angels stunned in murmuring duets and captivating solos. Music’s elastic tenor twisted and curled around Du Yun’s vocal lines with superhuman expressive power and fine nuance. Falkenheim delivered a devastating, semi-spoken monologue about the sexual violence that her angel endures.

Reed pulled off the difficult feat of making Mrs. X.E. human, even recognizable, while also refusing to let a glimmer of empathy to slip through. Singing with dramatic conviction and gorgeous tone, she made her character feel plausible.

Christopher Mirto, Oberlin's Assistant Professor of Opera Theater and the director of the production, has clearly shared an unflinching vision with these incredible singing actors, and found a way to conjure hellish magic with a handful of willing collaborators, a team of dramaturgs, and a bit of scenery in the seating area of a college coffeehouse. Though her pieces appeared only briefly, video designer Hannah Sandoz contributed a feverish, unnerving layer of additional images. Under Chamberlain, the ten-person orchestra tore into Du Yun's evocative score with virtuosic intensity. Guitarist Steve Fazio and cellist Annika Krafcik wove webs of sound in expertly handled solo turns, and overall, the group sounded much stronger and lusher than its numbers might imply.



Du Yun and Vavrek intend the opera as an allegory for human trafficking. The central tragedy of *Angel's Bone* is not that of Mr. X.E., nor of the gullibility and complicity of the public (portrayed with fervor by the chorus members), nor even of the familiarity of the media landscape from which Mrs. X.E. emerges wealthy, adored, and unrepentant. It is the fact that the story of *Angel's Bone* plays out every day in our communities, often with real children in place of the angels. For its musical coherence amid stylistic variety and its conveyance of ugly truths, *Angel's Bone* deserves its Pulitzer. For their captivating production and performance, the students, faculty, and staff of the Oberlin Opera Theatre deserve praise — perhaps even awe.

*Photos by Yevhen Gulenko.*

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