

**Concert Report: 'Our Town', an opera by Ned Rorem
at Baldwin-Wallace (February 11)**

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Baldwin-Wallace Conservatory Opera Program students have had the privilege of spending the last month being coached by two longtime opera production professionals. Guest stage director Beth Greenberg and guest music director and conductor Lucy Arner (a B-W alumna) have left their professional fingerprints all over a laudable production of 'Our Town', an opera by Ned Rorem, which opened on Thursday evening (February 11) at the Kleist Center on the B-W campus in Berea and runs through Sunday the 14th.

The operatic version of 'Our Town', based on the famous 1938 play by Thornton Wilder about the ordinary but cosmic lives of the denizens of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, is the result of a four-way commission with two additional commissioning partners. Wilder's estate granted Rorem the long-postponed rights to create a musical version, a libretto was crafted by J.D. McClatchy, and the work had its premiere at Indiana University in 2006.

Ms. Greenberg's staging held true to the stark minimalism Wilder had in mind ("no set, no curtain"). Laura Carlson's effective set featured a half spiral of straight back chairs floating over a disc shaped platform mirrored in earth- and moon-suggesting discs at the back of the set backlit with a thousand stars in the last act. Charlotte Yetman's rich textured costuming convincingly took us back to a small New England town in 1900, and Jeff Lock-

shine's subtle lighting plot isolated various parts of the stage to create smaller playing areas.

Ned Rorem had a challenging task in front of him. 'Our Town' is a wordy play and the ubiquitous State Manager in particular has to deliver lots of running narrative and commentary during the course of the evening. Choosing to set all but a few passages to music, Rorem has established an abstract melodic style for narrative and dialogue, broken up by traditional hymns that open the show and mark milestones in the lives of the central characters (church services, weddings, funerals). Rorem's self-effacing, gray-hued music stays very much in the background. As a result, the hymn tunes soar above the rest of the score as though they are its big arias.

Gene Stenger ably sang the big role of the Stage Manager on Thursday and George and Emily were winningly played by Benjamin Krumreig and Anna Caldwell. Along with Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs (Jonathan Coper & Sarah Heitman) and Mr. & Mrs. Webb (William Vallandigham & Jessica Waddle), they carry most of the show on their broad shoulders. Mr. Krumreig and Ms. Caldwell, both fine individual actor-singers, had a particularly strong chemistry going between them, and Krumreig's George was hysterical as an awkward adolescent in contrast to the noble carriage of Caldwell's Emily. In the third act when she revisits her past after her death in childbirth, Emily finally has the opportunity to break out into an impassioned aria. Ms. Caldwell was riveting in this, certainly the most expressive music of the evening.

Many in the supporting cast of minor characters and townspeople had little solo roles that were expertly dispatched all around. Tutti, they sounded lovely in choral and ensemble passages. For comic relief, the three energetic baseball players pulled off some fun pantomime work.

'Our Town' was very strong in dramatic and musical ensemble values. As actors, the cast hugely benefitted from Ms. Greenberg's expert staging and coaching, and Ms. Arner kept the musical proceedings well under her thumb from start to finish. Cast and orchestra were finely coordinated during the show and balances were well maintained. The direc-

tors wisely decided against supertitles, choosing instead to do everything possible to let the words come across. Except in a few instances when Rorem's vocal writing suddenly became ornate, they succeeded splendidly. The decision to combine the first two (short) acts into one helped preserve dramatic continuity.

Whether or not a musical version of 'Our Town' will ultimately become as iconic as the original play, this was a wonderful educational experience for B-W students and it makes a fine evening

of theater that deserves to be playing to full houses. Perhaps more of the B-W student population will turn out to cheer their peers on as the run of this interesting production progresses through the weekend.

Our Town returns to the Baldwin-Wallace stage on Friday and Saturday evenings, February 12 & 13 at 7:30 and Sunday afternoon, February 14 at 2. On Friday and Sunday, the role of the Stage Manager will be sung by Cory Tuck, and Emily by Marissa Chalker.