

Oberlin Opera Online: Phoning in Menotti & Poulenc

by Mike Telin



In 2020, encountering someone engrossed with their phone is hardly an oddity. But even back in the days when phones did two things — make and receive calls — there were those who spent hours on them while ignoring the other people in the room, or who shared their emotional frustrations with any sympathetic ear.

On Friday, November 6 at 7:30 pm, Oberlin Opera Theater will present the double bill of Gian Carlo Menotti’s 1947 comedy *The Telephone* and Francis Poulenc’s 1958 tragédie lyrique, *La voix humaine* (“The Human Voice”). Directed by Jason Aaron Goldberg, with music direction by Daniel Michalak, the pre-recorded broadcast will begin with a discussion featuring Goldberg and members of the cast and crew. Presented as part of Oberlin Stage Left, the performance will remain available on demand through November 13. Click [here](#) to view.

Goldberg, a 2016 Oberlin alum who is currently in his final year of completing an MFA at the Actor’s Studio Drama School, received the invitation to direct these operas from his former mentor Jonathon Field, the Conservatory’s director of Opera Theater.

“Jonathon and I were talking during the spring and I mentioned that I had been messing around with Zoom with a group of friends,” Goldberg recalled during a recent telephone conversation. Field reconnected with Goldberg during the summer, saying that he had remembered the production of *The Telephone* that Goldberg produced while still a student. And if anyone could figure out how to produce something of artistic merit while following all of the social distancing rules, it would be him.

“I asked Jonathon what the operas were, and when he told me *The Telephone* and *La voix humaine*, I said that *Voix* is a difficult opera but it’s good for a pandemic because there’s only one character. Then he said that we’d need to cast four sopranos — I told him it was a one-woman opera, and he said, ‘That’s why I want to hire you.’ He told me to think about it. I did, and I thought, I love Oberlin, I love Jonathon, I love those two pieces, and it would be great to show audiences that you can create a quality production while following all the rules and with a limited budget. So, I called him back and accepted.”

The Telephone centers around the young couple Ben (Jared Cohen) and Lucy (Mae Alice Harrell). Ben wants to propose to Lucy but finds it impossible because she is spending all of her time talking on the phone.

La voix humaine — based on the play of the same name by Jean Cocteau — also revolves around a telephone conversation, this one between a woman and the man who betrayed her. (Their discussion includes the topics of suicide, drug abuse, and abusive relationships.)



How did he turn a single role into four? “Poulenc is great because of his use of musical motives,” Goldberg said. “I divided the opera into those motives. There’s the exposition, the suicide waltz, the dog section — which is important in terms of its emotional psyche — which leads to the ending. And there you have the four roles, each at about ten to fifteen minutes. All of that took a while to figure out.”

The cast includes Daniela Machado as Woman 1, Callie Iliff as Woman 2, Jaclyn Hopping as Woman 3, and Isabel Braekey as Woman 4.

Artistic issues aside, Goldberg said his first order of business was to make sure that the entire process followed COVID guidelines. “I gathered all of Oberlin’s COVID regulations, and I investigated what other music schools were using for guidance, specifically for singing. I knew it was going to be difficult, but it was important to me that every single rule was followed.” Respecting those regulations required Goldberg to cast the operas by viewing iPhone videos. “I also couldn’t be in the coachings — I was directing Dan to direct the singers from my home in New Jersey.”

Following the rules also meant that during a three-hour rehearsal, Goldberg and his team could only work with one singer for an hour before letting the room air out for 30 to 45 minutes. But in the end, he said producing the operas was a satisfying artistic experience.

“I structured the filming days to feel like performances, and the tech to feel like an Oberlin tech rehearsal. It was important to me to get as close as possible to an Oberlin Opera experience, and to get a high-quality, Oberlin-worthy performance.” And where is the final recording? “It’s in the Oberlin Dropbox, so it’s in their hands.”

Winding down our conversation, Goldberg said that he is “so proud of my production team — stage manager Morgan Elizabeth Carder, associate director Charlotte Maskelony, assistant stage managers Cat Hill and Nisha Caiozzi, and music director Daniel Michalak — and the singers. It’s so important that everyone, everywhere knows that high-quality art can be safely created in this pandemic. No one has to give up hope, no one has to give up on the arts.”

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