

## Review

**Nightingale Opera Theatre: *Werther*  
at Solon Center for the Arts (August 2)**

by Robert Rollin



Last Friday evening's Nightingale Opera Theatre production of Jules Massenet's opera, *Werther*, was a delight. Above all it was meticulously prepared. Music Director John Simmons' piano rendition was so exceptionally flawless that the orchestra was not missed. His expression was constant, and his balance of contrapuntal sections with and without the singers was meticulous.

Equally important was that tempos, climaxes and other details were so well ingrained that the pace was swift and effective. All cast members and even the children's chorus kept things moving and did not let the plot's overwhelming sadness overcome the dramatic flow. The Solon Center for the Arts has an intimate, but well-equipped, stage that helped make scene changes seamless. The fine acoustics made the English translation easily intelligible.

Massenet imbued the opera with a wonderful musical tapestry that Simmons and the cast took great pains to delineate. Though strongly influenced by Wagner, Massenet has his own rich and varied musical personality that is comfortable in both beautiful counterpoint and atmospheric passages. The chromatic descending lines introduced in the Prelude return as musical depiction of sadness and despair throughout the opera. The harmony is complex and beautiful.

The scenario, based on Goethe's novel, *The Trials of Young Werther* (as adapted by librettists Blau, Miliet, and Hartmann), epitomizes late Romantic tragic opera. The Bailiff teaches his many children Christmas carols even though it is midsummer. When Werther arrives he observes Charlotte, the Bailiff's daughter, taking care of her young siblings and falls madly in love with her. Charlotte is engaged to Albert, and Werther, though in despair, tells her that she must be true to her commitment.

Werther returns several months later and follows the young couple on their way to church. When Charlotte comes out, Werther speaks of their first meeting, and, realizing the depth of his love, she tells him he must leave and not return until Christmas. When her sister Sophie interrupts them, Werther contemplates suicide and rushes away. Albert overhears and realizes Werther is in love with his wife.

On Christmas Eve as Charlotte tearfully reads his impassioned letters,

Werther suddenly appears. When asked by Charlotte to read to her from his translations of Irish bard Ossian, Werther chooses a passage where the poet foresees his own death. Charlotte begs him to stop, and Werther realizes she returns his love. She runs from his embrace and Werther leaves, taking Albert's pistols with him. After Albert returns she finds a note from Werther and rushes off hoping to reach him in time. Arriving at Werther's home, she sees he is mortally wounded, announces her undying love, and begs forgiveness. As the two embrace and Werther dies, the voices of the children are heard singing their Christmas carol.

Mezzo soprano Stephanie Foley Davis, as Charlotte, and tenor Timothy Culver, as Werther, led the fine company. After some inconsistency in vocal color in Act I, Davis hit her stride in the Act II duet with Culver. Culver was most outstanding in the musical soliloquies when he sang softly and plaintively to express despair. He tended to strain and distort in the high passages during more excited moments. Still, this is melodrama, and overall he really brought Werther to life.

Lyric soprano Melissa Davis, as Sophie, had a rather unfocused sound. Sophie, young and inexperienced and seeking a husband, is a character who adopts a false gaiety. Davis exaggerated this to the point of constantly bouncing on her toes. It is a virtuosic and challenging role, and lack of clarity on consonants made her unintelligible at times. She has a light and lovely voice, but needs to control it better.

Bass John Pickering as the Bailiff was consistently excellent. He has an attractive sound and acted in a very believable manner. Though the role was small, he added luster to the production.

Baritone Brian Keith Johnson, as Albert, had a fine voice and stage presence. He was particularly convincing in Act II, singing about his good fortune in being married to Charlotte.

Baritone Ryan Fitzgerald as Schmidt and tenor Michael Miller as Johann did well in their pairings. The lovely Act II canon between them was a delight, as was Simmons' fine piano accompaniment.

Act III is the climax of the opera and Foley Davis and Culver were terrific in their singing and in delineating their sadness. Again Simmons' accompaniment was very expressive in the long and beautiful Act IV Prelude, and the final dénouement by the two lead singers was exceptional. As Werther dies, Massinet brings back the cheerfully caroling childrens choir in a grisly, melodramatic juxtaposition worthy of the *Witches Sabbath* of Berlioz' *Symphony Fantastique*.

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