

**Review: Opera Circle's *Die tote Stadt*
at the Ohio Theatre (June 14)**



by Daniel Hathaway

Opera Circle staged an enticing production of Erich Korngold's *Die tote Stadt* ("The Dead City") on Saturday, June 14 at the Ohio Theatre in PlayHouseSquare. The opera is something of a rarity, probably because of the challenges of dealing with the eerie subtleties of its plot, its demand for a *Heldentenor* to sing the role of Paul, and its opulent 1920s orchestration. *Die tote Stadt* is a major undertaking for any small company, but Opera Circle admirably rose to the task.

Though not flawless, the production succeeded in the most important operatic category: the music. A strong and dedicated cast of singers and generally fine playing from a 65-piece orchestra expertly led by Grigor Palikarov brought Korngold's colorful and sometimes creepy music vividly to life.

The opera, based on Georges Rodenbach's 1892 novel, *Bruges-la-Morte*, and set in that Belgian canal town, explores the obsession of a widower (Paul) after the death of his wife (Marie). He sets up an altar in his house to enshrine her hair and other relics (the parallel to a vial of the blood of Christ preserved in the cathedral and processed through the streets once a year), but is unnerved when he meets Marietta, a dancer from Lille, and imagines her as a reincarnation of Marie.

Marietta becomes the apex of a love triangle involving Paul and his friend Frank. The story hovers between reality and hallucination — complicated by an inexplicable second act encounter with a Pierrot troupe and a bizarre episode in which Paul believes he has strangled Marietta with Marie's reliquated hair — finally resolving itself when Paul and Frank decide to turn their backs on this "City of Death."

The importance of the orchestra in *Die tote Stadt* was underlined in Opera Circle's staging. Too large to fit into the Ohio's pit, it occupied most of the stage, playing in front of a canal-side backdrop with some furniture in front on stage right and Marie's shrine on the left (for the second act, the backdrop changed to something resembling a street of Mediterranean restaurants with fish-shaped signs). While this setup favored the singers in terms of balance, a lot of the instrumental sound rose into the stage house and stayed there. Sometimes a particularly lovely detail would emerge: an early-on solo by clarinetist Robert Davis followed closely by one from English hornist Rachael Swanson.

Tenor Nicholas Simpson was splendid as Paul, negotiating a punishingly high and demanding vocal line with strength and agility. As Marietta (and the offstage voice of Marie), soprano Dorota Sobieska, who also directed the production, sounded fit and fine, best in the higher regions of her range where her voice carried more successfully into the house.

Baritone William Roberts (Frank) matched Simpson in vocal robustness, though a pulsating vibrato sometimes crept into his long, high notes. Mezzo-soprano Christina Carr, who sang the maid, Brigitta, rang out thrillingly (she mysteriously turned into a nun in the second act, returning to livery in the third).

One of the vocal highlights of the evening was James Binion's affecting performance of Pierrot's song in the middle act. Alyson Dezil (Juliette), Nicole Wong (Lucienne), Corey Shotwell (Gaston), Philip Formes (Victorin) and Douglas Binion (Graf Albert) brought lovely voices to their supporting roles. The offstage chorus sang prettily but was nearly inaudible, even from the second row.

Aside from some odd touches like the pink gondola in Act II (suddenly we're in Venice!) and the bedsheet costumes and hesitant choreography in the Act III procession, the major shortcoming in this production was the static staging of the singers. At times, they had so little to do that a concert version of the opera might have served the piece just as well. And too often, certain cast members spent long moments staring into the front-of-stage monitor rather than interacting with each other.

But the important thing was the score, and it was delightful to have an opportunity to hear Korngold's particular brand of 1920s movie music. His evocative orchestral preludes to

each of the three acts set the stage for some strange psychological episodes, and his demented version of *Pange lingua* during the procession of the Holy Blood in Act III was chilling.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 17, 2014.