

**Oberlin Opera Theater —
Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* (Nov. 11)**

by Daniel Hathaway



At once historical and metaphorical in its subject, Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* delivers a lot in a compact package. The eight singers of Oberlin Opera Theater and fifteen instrumentalists of the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble delivered an outstanding performance of the British composer's 1946 chamber opera last Wednesday evening in Hall Auditorium — one

that left the audience with a lot to think about.

The plot deals with an actual event that led to the founding of the Roman Republic, as depicted in works by Livy and Ovid. A Shakespeare narrative poem and a 1931 play by André Obey also fed into the libretto by Ronald Duncan, Britten's fellow pacifist, which is so opaquely symbolic in spots that director Jonathon Field provided a glossary of "inscrutable constructions and their meanings" in the program book (for example, "Burns for its quietus" means "death").

The metaphor that Britten and Duncan developed in their treatment of the story — without diminishing the central fact that Lucretia was ravished against her will by Tarquinius — seems to be the rape of Europe during World War II.





The opera is populated by historical characters (Tarquinius, Collatinus, Lucia, Junius, Bianca, and Lucretia) as well as two solo singers who represent a male and female chorus. In Field's production, the ancients were done up in period garb, while the male and female chorus appeared in modern dress that suggested academics sitting in their studies — like guest commentators on The History Channel — commenting on pagan events of long ago but from a Christian perspective. The choruses eventually crossed the line over into Lucretia's world after her ravishment and suicide to become intimately involved in the story.



The singing from the Wednesday-Saturday cast on opening night was uniformly superb. In his clarity and declamation of text, Joshua Blue was the quintessential Britten tenor in his Peter

Pearsian role as the Male Chorus. Soprano Elissa Pfaender was equally brilliant and lucid as his female counterpart.



Michael Floriano was imposing in appearance and handsome of voice as Tarquinius, and his centurion sidekicks Tim Gemesi and De'Ron McDaniel ably matched him in vocal and acting ability during the opening scene.

As Lucia and Bianca, Christine Jay and Abigail Peterson created female servants with distinct characters and strong but contrasting voices. Both were convincing spinning-wheel operators as well.



Lucretia, last to appear on stage, was beautifully sung and acted by Rebecca Printz, who made the central figure tragic as well as heroic.

Field's staging was understated and efficient, although he allowed himself a bit of extravagance with the flowers that first filled every corner of the second act set, then got strewn about in Lucretia's rage like corpses on a battlefield.



The ravishing of Lucretia, after her initial onstage struggle, was demurely hidden from the audience's view. Michael Grube's simple but evocative set, the gently contrasting color palette of Chris Flaharty's costumes, and Jeremy K. Benjamin's sensitive lighting embraced but never competed with the dramatic action.

Timothy Weiss and the excellent Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble — here made up of a string quintet plus woodwind quintet with percussion, harp, and piano — provided an intensely dramatic underscoring to the story. There's not a single phrase that

stuck in the ear afterward, but during the opera, Britten's evocative musical fragments combined into a narrative of great force and power.



The end of the opera is curious. As though a *Christus ex machina* has suddenly come down, the Male and Female Choruses are left alone to wonder if the world's suffering and pain are all there is. No, comes the answer.

*It is not all.
Though our nature's still as frail and we still fall,
and that great crowd's no less along that road,
endless and uphill;
for now, He bears our sin and does not fall.
And He, carrying all, turns around,
stoned with our doubt,
and then forgives us all.
For us did He live with such humility.
For us did He die that we might live,
and He forgives the wounds that we make
and the scars that we are.
In His Passion, He is our hope,
Jesus Christ, our Saviour.
He is all.*

That's a surprising *non sequitur* at the end of a brilliant dramatic work that still keeps its admirers wondering nearly seven decades after the opera's premiere. Yes, there was lots to talk about afterward.

Photos by Yevhen Gulenko.

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