

ContempOpera/Cleveland debuts Incubator Series (June 9)

by Mike Telin



With a mission to “give a voice to the composers of our time,” the latest addition to Northeast Ohio’s opera scene, [ContempOpera/Cleveland](#), presented an impressive first installment of the company’s Incubator Series at Cleveland Public Theatre on Friday, June 9. The evening featured musical selections from five operas, some of them works in progress.

The evening began with two duets from *Verlorene Heimat* by Dawn L. Sonntag. The piece recounts the true story of East Prussian Nazi resisters and the Jewish-Ukrainian girl they sheltered during the final months of World War II. The haunting “Once I Had a Garden” was beautifully sung by sopranos Rebecca Freshwater and Andrea Anelli. Baritone Brian Keith Johnson joined Freshwater for the hopeful “I Promise I Will Find You.” Sonntag’s musical color palette is enticing, and the three singers gave heartfelt performances.

Anelli brought dramatic despair to Argentine composer Saúl Cosentino’s *Dolor*, based on a poem of the same name by Alfonsina Storni. The title character expresses her desire to feel the perennial oblivion of the sea, and the theme of women in distress continued with Lucia’s aria “Contro il Circeo” from Lorenzo Salvagni’s opera-in-progress *Piedrigotta*. Anelli, singing with a focused sound, delivered her lines with poise.

The three arias from Steven Mark Kohn’s *Mary Chestnut*, about a woman who chronicled the perils of everyday life during the Civil War, are musically gripping. Anelli portrayed the Confederate matriarch with spirit and Southern charm during

“Prologue,” “Dinner Party,” and “A Long War.”

The performances of the six selections from Darryl Curry’s *Dorian Gray* left you wanting to hear the entire opera. Johnson (Lord Henry Wotton) and tenor Timothy Culver (Basil Hallward) were superb during “You With Your Dull Brown Hair.” Culver gave a magical performance of “Basil’s Secret,” while tenor Benjamin Bunsold embodied Dorian Gray during “Ah! I’m Shivering” and “The Wish.” Freshwater, who sang the role of Sybil Vane, and Bunsold brought chemistry to the duet “I Will Agree.” During “Open Up the Sky” Freshwater sang with fervor, but it was Bunsold’s and Johnson’s (as the portrait) striking performance of “I Choose” that stole the show.

The evening wasn’t all about opera scenes. Pianist Lorenzo Salvagni, who collaborated beautifully all night, performed Saúl Cosentino’s *Tangomania* with rhythmic flair. And Steven Mark Kohn’s arrangements of American folk songs *Ten Thousand Miles Away* and *The Farmer’s Cursed Wife* received delightful performances by Timothy Culver.

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