

Cleveland Opera Theater {NOW} Festival: Dawn Sonntag's *Verlorene Heimat* (Jan. 28)

by Nicholas Stevens



The question has long troubled poets, playwrights, musicians, and visual artists: how best to activate collective memory through art, especially when the events in question constitute the darkest hour in recorded history? As part of their New Opera Works {NOW} Festival, Cleveland Opera Theater and its collaborating partners recently ventured an answer in the form of a new opera: *Verlorene Heimat* (“Lost Homeland”) by composer Dawn Sonntag.

The cast and orchestra sounded fresh in their performance of the 90-minute piece on January 28 at the Maltz Performing Arts Center, despite the fact that several of the singers had been inhabiting other roles throughout the Festival weekend. Inspired by recollections from Sonntag’s family members, the scenario for *Verlorene Heimat* reflects the real-world timeline of World War II — especially the events of 1944-45, when soldiers, scientists, and everyday citizens alike joined in the mass murder of millions.

The Cleveland premiere occurred on January 27 — International Holocaust Remembrance Day — yet *Verlorene Heimat* addresses the Nazis’ extermination campaign only indirectly through the character of Hedwig (Dawna Warren, soprano), a Ukrainian girl fated never to see her Jewish father again. Sent to perform forced labor for an anti-Nazi East Prussian family, the Neubers (Sonntag’s own ancestors), Hedwig joins



the women of the family in fleeing the coming Soviet invasion.

August Neuber (Brian Johnson, baritone), family patriarch and deposed mayor of the village of Schoenberg, deploys to the front on the orders of local Nazi party chief Herr Schultz (Timothy Culver, tenor), though he is miraculously reunited with his wife Elise (Rebecca Freshwater, soprano) and daughters Christa and Katja (Polina Korniyushenko and Maya Ciurcel). Hedwig, who runs off with prisoner of war Damien (Ethan Burck, tenor), meets a grim fate.



In a concluding scene set in 2012, the now-elderly Christa (Olga Druzhinina, in a speaking role) remembers her childhood and conjures a fantasy in which Hedwig lives to adulthood. The mass tragedy of the title — that of fleeing families like the Neubers, caught between the intimidation of the Nazis at home and the incursion of the Soviets from abroad — accesses a greater horror: the fact that millions more never enjoyed the sort of happy ending that Christa imagines for her Ukrainian friend.



Bass Jason Budd radiated authority in sermons and messages of reproach as the village Pastor. Calling on his flock to stand against injustice, he seemed to break the fourth wall often — especially on the subject of refugees from war. Warren and Burck made for compelling young lovers as Hedwig and Damien, and Johnson sang the part of August with obvious emotional investment. Freshwater remained strong

throughout as the Neuber matriarch, and Culver — who said in a post-concert discussion that he thought of his character Schultz as a neighbor who is “a little off, but then gains some power” — wisely played the village Nazi neither as a cartoon goose-stepper nor a misguided loner, but as an entirely human monster.



Sonntag’s music, scored for piano quintet with clarinet and trumpet — and at times reminiscent of early 20th-century English music in its depictions of interrupted pastoral bliss — afforded the chamber orchestra opportunities to both step forward and fade into cinematic omnipresence. A screen above the stage displayed the text, superimposed over actual photographs from Sonntag’s family collection. This was useful despite occasional divergences between sung and projected words. Overall, the strong roster of performers, powerful subject matter, and evocative vocal and instrumental writing combined to make *Verlorene Heimat* a performance to remember — in a double sense.

Photos by Alejandro Rivera.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 30, 2018. Revised February 5, 2018.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)