

The Cleveland Opera: Moniuszko's *Straszny dwór* at the Ohio Theater (June 16)

by David Kulma



A rare operatic treat graced the Ohio Theatre at Playhouse Square on Saturday, June 16: a single performance of Stanisław Moniuszko's 19th-century, Polish-language gem *Straszny dwór*. Designed to celebrate the centenary of Polish independence, this traditionally-staged production with Cleveland Ballet added up to an uneven evening.

Moniuszko was influenced by the three main operatic streams of mid-19th-century Western Europe: French grand, Italian bel canto, and German Romantic. By mixing those with aspects of Polish song and dance, he created a national opera style. With a libretto by Jan Chęciński, *Straszny dwór* — loosely translated as “The Haunted Manor” — tells the tale of two 18th-century Polish brothers who return from war and renounce marriage and love. But when they visit Count Miecznik at his



manor estate, they fall for his two daughters. The titular manor is humorously “haunted”

by another suitor as a tactic to frighten away the brothers that ultimately backfires. As comedy prescribes, all is well at the end.



This straightforward, silly plot gave Moniuszko the chance to flex his Weberian color palette alongside Rossinian fireworks. Full of lovely arias, ensembles, choruses, and Polish dance music, *Straszny dwór* is an enjoyable four-act opera. Considering its nationalist sentiments, it is no surprise that its successful Warsaw premiere in 1865 led to the Russian censors pulling it after three performances. Since the advent of independent Poland, it has become a mainstay of Polish opera houses.



Visually, this Cleveland production mixed the stunning and functional. The spectacular costumes — elaborate period garb in eye-catching colors — were on loan from the Teatr Wielki, Warsaw’s grand opera company. The evocative backdrops of landscapes and the minimal sets by designer Charles Gliha and artist Hubert Wisniewski enhanced the traditional setting, especially the excellent, life-sized portraits and faux grandfather clock in the spooky third act. In Act IV, the dancing from Cleveland Ballet — choreographed by Gladisa Guadalupe — was full of regal twirls. Stylish folk dancing from the local ensemble Piast, choreographed by Agnieszka Kotlarsic, also graced the stage.

Musically, the performance was hit-and-miss. Baritone Francisco X. Prado sang with a clarion, fatherly tone as Miecznik. As the brothers, powerful tenor Mikhail Urusov was an impassioned Stefan and deep-toned bass Mikhail Smigeliski was a smoothly flowing Zbigniew. Soprano Dorota Sobieska brought uneven phrasing and unclear coloratura to the role of Hanna, while soprano Justyna Giernola gave Hanna’s sister Jadwiga a lovely, understated air.



Mezzo-soprano Christina Carr was stylish and humorous as the brothers’ aunt Cześnikowa, while tenor Andrzej Stec (above) stole the show with his laugh-out-loud funny acting and skillful singing as the stereotypical dandy Pan Damazy. Strong of voice, baritone Albert Niedel was successfully bumbly as the brother’s attendant Maciej, while bass Paweł Izdebski’s grumbly Skołuba was delightfully petulant. The Cleveland

Opera Chorus — joined by members of Chicago’s Paderewski Symphony Chorus — successfully maneuvered the many choral numbers.



Conductor Grzegorz Nowak led a clearly under-rehearsed orchestra seated in front of the stage. Frequent phasing across the ensemble, wrong notes creating clashing harmonies, and singer entrance mistakes inspired wincing throughout a generally well-paced performance. If there only there had been an opportunity for a second performance for the orchestra and singers to solidify their parts.



Getting to experience this homeland favorite from Polish artists was a real joy, but it’s sad that under current circumstances, the company couldn’t marshal the resources to make sure this fascinating opera shone with its full luster. The gorgeous costumes from

Poland's Teatr Wielki showed how a large professional company can make grand opera a glorious spectacle.

Photos by Malgorzata Zaczek & Seanmichael Kvacek.

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