

CIM Opera Theater: Stravinsky & Ravel (Nov. 7)

by Timothy Robson



From November 7-10, Cleveland Institute of Music Opera Theater presented a double bill of Igor Stravinsky's early *Le Rossignol* and Maurice Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges* in CIM's Kulas Hall. Dean Southern directed, and Harry Davidson conducted the CIM Orchestra, with sets and lighting by Dave Brooks and costumes by

Inda Blatch-Geib. It was a very fine show, both musically and theatrically.

Stravinsky began composition of *Le Rossignol*, based on Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Nightingale," in 1907. He took a multi-year pause to compose *Petrushka* and *Le sacre du printemps* for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes before completing *Le Rossignol* in 1914. It would be performed that same year in Paris, in a production with the singers in the orchestra pit and actions mimed on stage.

CIM's production put the orchestra upstage behind a scrim. Images and video were projected onto that scrim, and on several smaller screens. The action took place on a broad, shallow platform downstage, as well as on two small platforms above seats in the auditorium. The performers also used the aisles, lending the evening a pageant-like aspect. The coordination of singers and orchestra was



remarkably exact, given the distance between the playing spaces.

CIM performed *Le Rossignol* in French, with English supertitles. For the first ten minutes, it was not clear what language was being sung — the diction was too mushy. That continued to be a problem in both the Stravinsky and Ravel works. Both *Rossignol* and *L'enfant* have huge casts. The principals were double-cast; I saw the first cast on Wednesday evening.

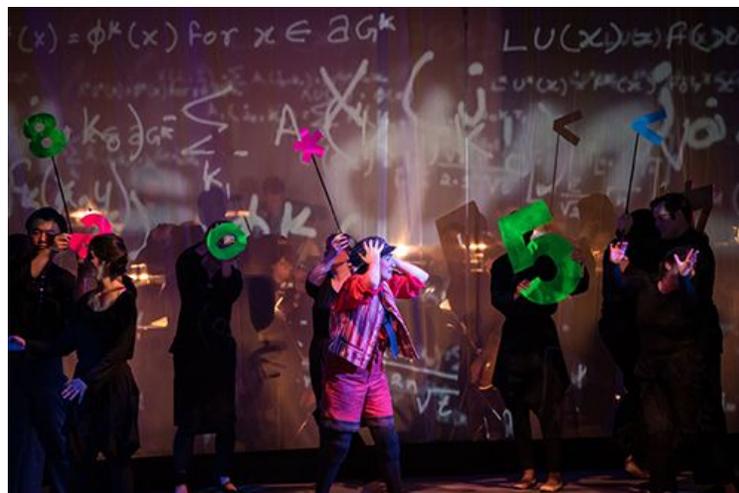
In *Rossignol*, The Fisherman, who acts as a kind of Greek chorus marking “paragraphs” in the action, was sung by tenor Giwoong Kim, who has a baritonal richness to his voice. Baritone Xiaoyang Zhang brought dignity to the part of The Emperor, whose actions catalyze the story. Mezzo-soprano Brianna Nemback and baritone Daniel Fridley kept the action moving as The Cook and The Chamberlain. But pride of place goes to soprano Siyeon Kim, who sang the immensely difficult role of The Nightingale. She brought impeccable phrasing and intonation to flights of coloratura far above the staff. The chorus, who were very busy portraying townspeople, courtiers, and the like, were well-prepared musically and moved effectively onstage.



Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges* ("The Child and the Spells"), to a libretto by Colette, takes place in a well-appointed country home, where a naughty young boy has been confined to his room by his mother. Objects that he has been systematically destroying — chair, teapot, clock, the shepherd and shepherdess who decorate the wallpaper — come to life to sing about the miseries the boy has caused them. Suddenly his room becomes a magical garden, and the creatures and trees that the boy has tortured haunt him. During a fight, a squirrel is accidentally injured. The boy binds the squirrel's wound, and surprised by his compassion, the garden's residents take pity on him. The opera ends as he calls for his *maman*.

Southern identified characters with props that became part of the action — the shepherds carried large plaques with torn wallpaper. Brooks used abstract paintings by Paul Klee in the scenic projections, but they did not add significant context to the opera. Although the story is mostly light-hearted, there is a more serious moral about the importance of compassion.

There was not a weak link in the cast. Mezzo Polina Davydov was convincing as The Boy, singing with both impudence and, especially at the end, tenderness. Several of the leading singers in *Rossignol* had small parts in *L'enfant*, notably Siyeon Kim, who returned in a much shorter, but equally virtuosic role as The Nightingale in the Ravel. The male and female cats (Austin Cale Cox and Liza Moss) were hilarious in their antics. The Little Old Man, as sung by Benjamin Liu, was like a crazy, absent-minded professor.



The CIM Orchestra was excellent throughout both operas, and Harry Davidson led with confidence during the tricky rhythms and ensemble-playing. Except for my quibbles about the French diction, this was an evening in which it was not necessary to add the caveat “for a student performance.” The performers and producers were imaginative, committed, and, most importantly, musical.

Photos by Matt Shiffler.

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