

Oberlin Winter Term Opera: *Missy Mazzoli's Proving Up* (Feb. 4)

by Nicholas Stevens



Opera, states composer Missy Mazzoli, has a “superpower of subtext.” The feeling of sitting in a room among strangers as unamplified voices subtly charge and change the air: this, more than any strict definition, constitutes the form’s precious essence, in her view. Few living composers exploit this superpower of multiple media and meanings the way Mazzoli does, leaving ample room for

interpretation while honing an overall point so sharp that it cuts through regardless of staging. Oberlin Opera Theater’s recent Winter Term production of *Proving Up*, her bracing latest, found director Christopher Mirto and a cast of students more than equal to the challenge of realizing the opera’s subtext, picking up where music and words leave room for performers’ magic.

Clanging radiators could hardly ruin the experience of hearing *Proving Up* mere feet from the set in the College’s Wilder Main Lounge on Monday, February 4. As Mazzoli and librettist Royce Vavrek joked in a post-performance interview, it added to the haunted feel of a haunting performance. Mirto staged the opening aria for Pa Zegner, the farmer and father played with chilling detachment by baritone



Shawn Roth, as a deceptive welcome to a promised land. Orchestra members, clothed in Helene Siebret's convincing if at times anachronistic costumes, wandered through the scene beaming as Roth sang the praises of a beneficent Uncle Sam. Cellist Andrew Johnson rocked gently on the family swing set.



Proving Up follows the Zegners — Ma, Pa, sons Peter and Miles, and a pair of daughters who turn out to be ghosts — as they struggle to qualify for property ownership through the U.S. Homestead Act of 1862. Peter spends the entire opera seriously injured; in Mirto's staging, actor Colin Anderson lay bleeding from some unseen act of violence in a trough throughout. Sopranos Maggie Kinabrew and Katherine Krebs stole scenes, if not

the whole show, as the daughters, soaring to shocking pitches in operatic style only to cackle, mock, and wheedle in extended vocal techniques, haunting the parents who lost them. Only Miles, played by tenor Mac Atkinson, can see them. Singing as a boy at the beginning, Atkinson allowed his tone and pitch to falter. After embarking on an adventure that Miles imagines as a passage into manhood, however, the tenor took on a confident if compact sound, more Peter Pears than Pavarotti. Few singers can boast of singing an aria while circling the audience on a bicycle, but now Atkinson can.

Alexis Reed, astonishing as Mrs. X.E. in last year's production of *Angel's Bone*, once again demonstrated her gift for acting as Ma Zegner, soaring vocally even in this less prominent role. Though both she and Roth sang with grace and technical polish, the two could hardly have differed more in mood. Reed's every gesture and sound was a



manifestation of a mother's grief, while Roth's dead-eyed delivery helped make his motto, "farmers need to look out for other farmers," sound like the authoritarian credo of a brainwashed man.



As valuable as the contributions of the living characters were, the only one as gripping to watch and hear as the daughters was the mysterious Sodbuster, sung with menace by baritone Thomas Litchev. Alternately unhinged and self-assured, whooping and raving between icy declarations, Litchev loomed over the final

scenes from the moment he appeared on the swing set, knife dangling and eyes lolling.

Many instrumentalists under the direction of Joseph Hodge in the "pit" — actually a patch of floor next to the seats — stood out. Double bassist Joshua Rhodes captured the shifts and lurches of the scenario in sound, at times swelling to support the singers' lines only to slide down into silence. Percussionist Tyler Smith reigned over a kingdom of repurposed guitars, mounted in a rack to facilitate mallet rolls on the open strings. Bassoonist Abigail Heyrich crept into textures as a high voice and thundered beneath on contrabassoon, and harpist Hannah Allen added an essential eeriness with ringing harmonics — pinpricks in the orchestral fabric.



As settlers and as human beings, the Zegners fail. Their American dream dies as surely and incrementally as their children, all sacrificed in the end. Together, Mazzoli, Vavrek, Mirto, the design and production team, and the cast created a semi-immersive drama that remained moored in the 1870s even as the gap between aspiration and reality, familiar to today's strivers and survivors,

deepened into a chasm. Karen Russell's short story has become a gripping musical and verbal text in the co-creators' hands. In the fertile sod of Oberlin's opera program, the unchecked ambition at the root of the Zegners' struggles sprouted into a suffocating canopy of vines, their poisoned fruit and flowers irresistible to all.

Photos by Yevhen Gulenko.

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