

**Oberlin Winter Term opera:
premiere of *The Puppy Episode* (Feb. 16)**

by Daniel Hathaway



“It takes so many people to put on a production, especially a new one,” Oberlin Opera professor and director Christopher Mirto said in a recent interview with this publication. And lots of time as well, especially when the gestation period for a new work coincides with a pandemic.

Matthew Recio’s *The Puppy Episode*, with libretto by Royce Vavrek, stage direction by Mirto, musical preparation by Dan Michalak, and set design by Julia Noulín-Merat, received its premiere performance on the

stage of Warner Concert Hall at the Oberlin Conservatory on February 16. Tiffany Chang conducted the eight-piece orchestra.

Although the 90-minute work achieved its final form at Oberlin during the Conservatory’s three-week Winter Term, wheels were turning long before opening night. The opera was commissioned and workshopped by Chicago Opera Theater, and after its premiere at Oberlin, will be revived later this year by Opera Columbus.

Inspired by the 1997 “Puppy Episode” of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, the plot tracks the lives of three individuals who confront their sexuality. Recio described them in an [interview](#): “Gil is a teenager, Phyllis is elderly and has dementia, and Louise is middle-aged. All the characters relate during the story and intersect at the end. The story isn’t just about coming out — it’s about relationships.”

Gil has a crush on a boy named Clay, and plans to watch the *Puppy Episode* with him. Louise has been exploring her sexuality in online chats with women, a secret she’s

hiding from her husband, Joe. Phyllis is living in an assisted living facility and still remembers Dot, a girl she fancied while studying to be a secretary.

After watching the DeGeneris episode, Gil and Clay come closer to declaring their mutual feelings, Louise comes out to her husband, who is heartbroken, and Phyllis lives out the fantasy of a night dancing with Dot. The following day, Gil visits his grandmother (Phyllis!) at her home, where she is in the care of her nurse (Louise!). This leads to a gentle moment of recognition between Gil and Phyllis in which Phyllis cheers on Louise, who twirls like the Dot she remembers.

The production was hi-tech and ecologically minded. QR codes at check-in took audience members to a website with a program note, synopsis, notes from the composer and librettist, cast and production team bios, production and cast lists, and COVID precautions — an unusual invitation to keep phones lit up during the show, which normally causes ushers to glare or hyperventilate.

The production might have gone one step further, if the technology exists, and made the libretto or at least the projections available on devices as well. Supertitles, a valuable audience resource in a wordy production, were too subtle — formatted in small type and projected on the rear of the set. In a big hall like Warner, sung words can get lost in the acoustic, and when you can't make out the text, your attention begins to wander.

The singers were musically outstanding, if sometimes difficult to understand — Chris Leimgruber as Gil, Jon Motes as Clay, Callie Iliff as Louise and Dot, Jaclyn Hopping as Phyllis, Anthony D. Anderson as Joe, Gil's Father, and the Man in Houndstooth, and Elizabeth Hanje as the Comedian.

Matthew Recio's music, expressive and listenable, was expertly led by Tiffany Chang and ably played by the excellent orchestra. Percussionist Tyler Smith gets a special hand for efficiently handling a busy part.

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