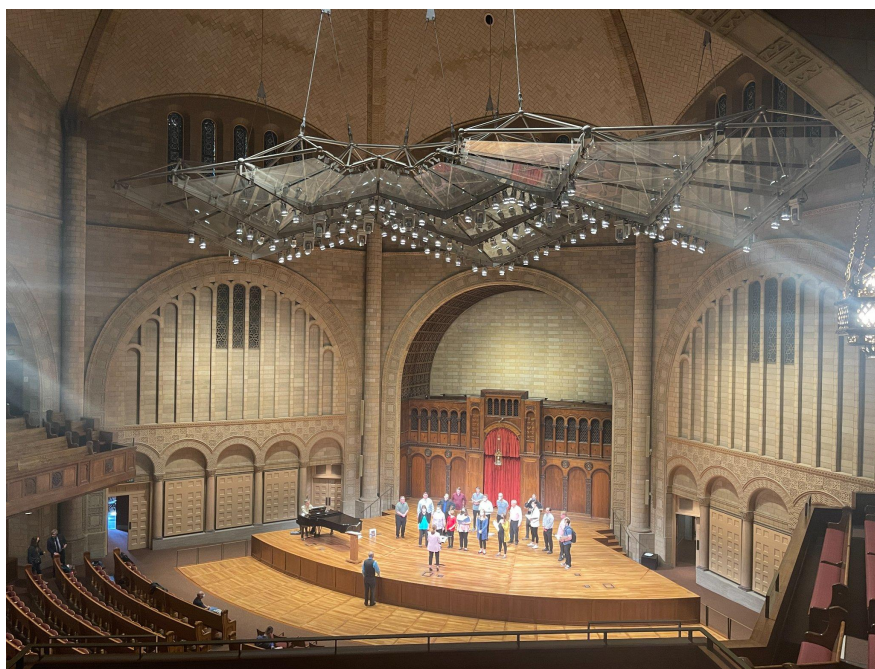


The Sparks Fly Upward
at the Maltz PAC (June 12)

by Daniel Hathaway



“Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward,” a line from *The Book of Job*, inspired the title of a full-length opera that received its Cleveland premiere last weekend at the Maltz Performing Arts Center. I saw the last of the four performances on Sunday afternoon, June 12.

With libretto and music by Cathy Lesser
Mansfield, the opera,

which really more resembles a staged oratorio, filled the stage of Silver Hall with the 40-member cast and chorus.

The Sparks Fly Upward traces the saga of three families, two Jewish (the Rosenbaums and the Steins), one Christian (the Webers), beginning in the fall of 1938, when the Nazis start deporting Jews to Poland and the atrocities of *Kristallnacht* signal troubles to come. Escape plans are developed, one involving a family in Cleveland, another in which the Webers will hide their Jewish friends, but several of the children are arrested during the “Factory Action” raids on forced work locations and sent to Auschwitz.

Throughout the events, the characters turn to *The Book of Job*, trying to understand why God permits human suffering, and how, like Job, to remain faithful when everything is falling apart around them.



By the time the smoke clears at the end of the War, the two mothers, Rosa and Lina, have perished at the hands of the Nazis, the children are reunited, and the Rosenbaums and Steins emigrate to the U.S. Fifty years later, the three families reunite in Berlin to celebrate the rededication of the Neue Synagogue.



An important element in the Cleveland production is the former Temple-Tifereth Israel, which became the Milton and Tamar Maltz Performing Arts Center at Case Western Reserve University in 2010, but whose sanctuary retains the furnishings of a synagogue. You couldn't ask for a more impressive stage set for the concluding

scenes in *The Sparks Fly Upward*, and Mansfield's music and Jeffrey Lesser's staging brought the piece to a magnificent and celebratory conclusion.



Other settings in the opera include apartments, stores, train stations, factories, and hiding places — more difficult to suggest in such a vast space. Smaller scenes were staged on platforms and effectively isolated by lighting.

Since Silver Hall has no orchestra pit, the 36 instrumentalists were strung out in front of the wide stage platform, but good sound design and sensitive voice enhancement created an excellent balance between forces. Conductor Daniel Singer kept everything together and flowing.



There's not a lot of action, which is what makes this piece more of a staged oratorio, but Cathy Manfield's music is continuously engaging, and some choruses with sophisticated layering of voices and orchestra are ravishingly beautiful. There are not many opportunities for joyful music in a production about the Holocaust, but here there were enough to sustain interest throughout.



R. Stephen Gracey and Kathryn Wolfe Sebo brought experienced voices and stage presence to the roles of Julius and Lina Rosenbaum, while rising seventh-grader Henry Miller sang a brief but impressive vocal solo as Peter Stein. Leslie Tinnaro and Ross A. Williams as Ruth and Hans Weber were contemplative as they sang “All That We Once Had is Gone.” The large ensemble cast was vocally strong across the board.

The orchestra, drawn from Cleveland's fine pool of freelance musicians, sounded assured and expressive, and some lovely incidental solos graced the score. T. Paul Lowery's set and projection design used the stage to maximum effect while Marcus Dana's lighting kept one's eyes and ears focused on the matters at hand.

That said, clocking in at nearly three hours including intermission, the show could use a bit of judicious tightening for what will hopefully be future performances.

This production combined the patina of professionalism with the fervor and commitment of family and community — and a glance down the list of participants reveals many interconnections. Obviously well funded by a number of individuals and sources, *The Sparks Fly Upward* was a huge undertaking and the results were impressive.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 20, 2022.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)