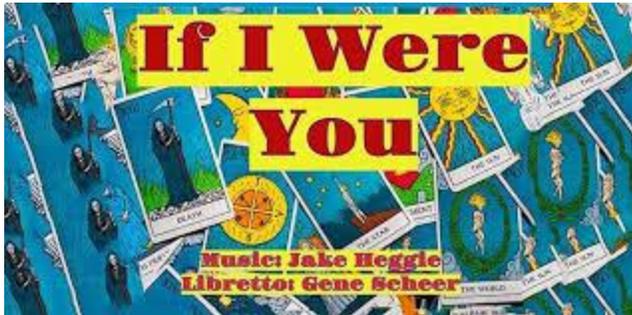


**Nightingale Opera Theater:
Jake Heggie's *If I Were You* (July 9)**

by Jacob Strauss



Si j'étais vous, I would not trust anyone who tries to solve your problems for you. You have to do it yourself, face up to the bleak black wall looming above and keep standing straight. You succumb if you don't, and that spells long, regressive rest. Atrophying strength. Decomposition.

In Nightingale Opera Theater's production of Jake Heggie's 2019 two-act opera *If I Were You* — presented at Hudson's Barlow Community Center on Saturday, July 9 — the protagonist, Fabian Hart (tenor Ye Lynn Han), buys the snake oil offered by Brittomara (mezzo-soprano Sydney Murrell), and Hart keeps asking for more. Dressed in red and black, Murrell gave a sharp, Luciferean performance, enabling the young Fabian's destructive behavior.

When the curtains part, Fabian, moaning on a gurney, is being taken to the hospital after a car crash. Brittomara is the medical professional keeping Fabian in stable condition, leveraging this position of power to convince Fabian that he is in need of something beyond medical care.

Gene Scheer's libretto alternates between a desire for more life, and an ambivalence towards actually living. Heggie's score, played on piano by Patrick Wickliffe, moves with methodical pace, emphasizing the drama, and is filled with the characters' encounters with death, and hope that Fabian will find his grace.

Time passes. The beatific Diana, sung by soprano Courtney San Martin dressed in white, enters the auto shop and asks about her fender bender. There, she meets Fabian, who is looking for his totaled car in hopes of finding his notebook. Diana sees his car and is amazed he survived the crash. She sings Hallelujah after her minor accident, and Fabian, dazed, and unsure if he is still alive, falls for Diana and her persistent gratefulness and hope.

Yet Fabian does not know what to do. He loves her, and is incapable of making a move. Thinking only of Diana, he loses track of his simple tasks at work and risks getting fired. His boss, the hypertense Mr. Putnam, performed with lumbering unhappiness by baritone Michael Richardson, threatens termination. In a shiny red dress, Brittomara watches the whole scene unfold and begins singing to Fabian, distracting him.

Through a confusing moment of miscommunication, Mr. Putnam fires Fabian, who then uses his recently acquired power to transplant his soul into Mr. Putnam's body. He chants something like a Sanskrit prayer prayed forward and mirrored until Fabian is in someone else's voice.

In the most dynamic scene, Diana's world comes into view at a bar. Two drunk girls (Audrey Nolte and Sarah Petko) doowop during a cornhole game. Diana pines for the bellicose Paul (baritone Charles Austin Piper), who is dancing with Rachel (Rose Guo). Both are tanked. Selena (soprano Loucine Topouzian), Diana's best friend, enters with a delightful sound.

The characters are set for tragedy. Brittomara pulls their strings and observes the results with a grin. It really is the devil's show, and it's fun to watch Brittomara if you need a different perspective of Fabian's lack of control.

Each character has their own musical motif, and the music shifts as quickly as the emotional moment requires. The minimalist set was effective, giving the right amount of information to allow one's imagination to fill the rest of the scene. It provided a simple canvas for the performers to express themselves purely, and sing.

Director Cynthia Skelley-Wohlschlager and music director John Simmons contributed a wonderful show. It was a phenomenal opportunity for the young singers to perform a recently composed opera by an established composer and librettist. The freshness of the voices, and the confidence of their performances made for a special evening.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 21, 2022.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)

,