

Oberlin Opera's *Ada Lovelace* is as free as a bird (Jan. 26)

by Stephanie Manning



Ada Lovelace's "infinite energy" was more mental than physical. Lovelace, a 19th-century English mathematician, was chronically ill for most of her life — yet her agile mind worked magic on numbers, paving the way for important scientific discoveries.

That dichotomy is a cornerstone of *The Infinite Energy of Ada Lovelace*, composer Kamala Sankaram and librettist Rob Handel's opera about the brilliant woman often considered the first computer programmer. Oberlin Opera Theater presented a simple but effective staging on January 26, directed by Cara Consilvio.

With a runtime of only 45 minutes, the piece sticks to its essential story line, all tied to Ada's struggles balancing her mathematical work with her public reputation. The set design of the Warner Concert Hall stage was similarly straightforward, with a few key furniture pieces supplemented by projected videos on the back wall.

Much of the audience's attention, then, focuses on the singing actors. Luckily, mezzo-soprano Kailey Pritchard's performance as Ada Lovelace was as determined and passionate as the real Ada was about math. Pritchard's warm voice and witty humor created a compelling Countess of Lovelace, one with equally strong convictions about her scientific work and her family commitments.

Ada's husband William Lovelace (sung with tenderness by tenor Christopher Leimgruber) worries about his wife's bold ambitions, especially after a visit from American writer Harriet Beecher Stowe (the clear-voiced Saige Hoffman). Stowe warns that she may be releasing a book about Ada's difficult family past — her parents became estranged among rumours of her father's incestuous affair.

Things are further complicated when Ada befriends fellow mathematician Charles Babbage (the earnest bass-baritone Matthew Garvey), and their closeness fuels untrue

romantic speculation. In reality, Babbage recognizes Ada's ability to help him construct the Analytical Engine, an early computing machine. The opera's score is at its most musically descriptive when the Analytical Engine is involved, with bubbly pizzicatos and looping melodic patterns echoing its turning cogs and levers.

Conductor Matthew Brown led a small ensemble of string quartet and piano, a fittingly intimate combination. From my seat on the left side of the theater, the electronic keyboard often sounded too loud in the mix, but the string quartet was occasionally heard alone in some melancholic transitional sections.

The meaning of the opera's title is revealed by Harriet Beecher Stowe's gift of a hummingbird, which leads William Lovelace to reflect on how the small creature's "infinite energy" mirrors the quality he admires in his wife. This solo aria allowed Leimgruber to take on a more assertive presence, delivering a touching performance while the hummingbirds on video fluttered and darted around.

With only one act to work with, the 45 minutes flew by, understandably leaving a few questions unresolved. Did Stowe publish that book? (Yes.) Did Babbage complete his engine? (No.) Instead, the piece ends with the married Lovelaces, re-committing to each other in a genuinely romantic duet. A sweet note to end the evening on.



Photos by Abe Frato

Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 30, 2025.

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