

Margi Griebeling-Haigh's *The Higgler* gets a curious, yet charming, world premiere (June 8)

by Stephanie Manning



The Higgler is an opera about missed opportunities, mixed signals, and difficult decisions. So what awaits its regretful characters once the story ends? Well, your guess is as good as mine.

The ambiguous ending of Margi Griebeling-Haigh's opera is perhaps its biggest paradox. On one hand, when the lights went up not long after a key plot reveal, it left plenty of unanswered questions. On the other, it was

hard not to be charmed by the world premiere production at Disciples Christian Church in Cleveland Heights, which I saw on June 8.

The quandary about the ending originates not from Griebeling-Haigh's libretto, but from the original text — A.E. Coppard's short story "The Higgler," which the composer follows almost to the letter. Narrator Joseph Hollings occasionally read out verbatim passages, describing certain scenes that wouldn't have otherwise been possible with the limited set. But director Marla Berg ensured that all transitions were clear, and the rotating backdrops allowed up to three distinct locations to be represented onstage at one time.

Tenor Brian Skoog portrayed the main character, Harvey Witlow, who recently returned from the army and now works as a higgler — essentially a traveling merchant. Skoog gave a measured performance as a man of many contradictions. Described as "crafty but not at all unkind," Harvey is in one moment shocking local farmer Mrs. Sadgrove and her daughter Mary with stories of the war, while in the next he's giving charity to the village children.

Meeting the Sadgroves is a key moment for Harvey, who becomes enamored with the beautiful and aloof Mary. Soprano Gabrielle Haigh brought out Mary's painfully shy, yet curious nature both in her acting and her light, airy voice. Mezzo soprano Elisabeth Frey embodied the practical and mysteriously ill Mrs. Sadgrove, who eventually takes Harvey

aside to ask him to marry her daughter. Spooked, thinking the older woman is scheming something, he declines, thus ending Act I.

Griebeling-Haigh's music is contemporary but not atonal, its playful numbers more likely to have rhythmic and harmonic symmetry between the singers and instrumentalists. Conductor Steven Smith led a small but mighty chamber orchestra, with great performances all around. The score

emphasizes the double reed section — oboist Terry Orcutt, English hornist Johanna Cox Pennington, and bassoonist Mark DeMio all got plenty of time in the spotlight.



Among the arias, the memorable opening “Damned and done” gets reprised in the second act, as Harvey once again laments his financial situation. Now deliberately avoiding the Sadgroves, Harvey decides to get married to his village sweetheart Sophy Dawes, played in a standout performance by the charismatic soprano Lisl Wangermann.

The strong-willed Sophy quickly butts heads with Harvey's mother, Mrs. Witlow (mezzo soprano Denise Milner Howell). Although this “tragicomic” opera leans more towards tragedy, the squabble between these two is probably the most effective moment of comedy, combining now outdated insults (“peevish hoyden!”) with humorously modern-sounding ones (“I think your cooking is nasty!”).

When Harvey eventually returns to the Sadgroves' farm, he finds that Mrs. Sadgrove has died in the night, leaving Mary paralyzed about what to do. She confesses to Harvey that she always had feelings for him. Shocked by this admission, Harvey parts ways with Mary, his inner monologue alluding that he will perhaps find a new job as a working bailiff on her farm.

But will he? Because, “of course there was Sophy; but still—Sophy!” What comes next for these characters is far from clear. And yet, that messiness also makes the opera feel more human. After all, real life doesn't always have a neat and tidy ending.

Photos by Rob Werman

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