

## Margi Griebing-Haigh's *The Higgler* now on video

by Daniel Hathaway



*The Higgler*, a “tragi-comic chamber opera” with music and libretto by Margi Griebing-Haigh debuted at Disciples Christian Church early in June.

Adapted from a romantic English short story by A. E. Coppard about missed opportunities in life and love, the 90-minute opera was recorded live by Enharmonic Records, and is now available for viewing free of charge on Griebing-Haigh’s YouTube [channel](#).

Directed by Marla Berg and conducted by Steven Smith, the production translates beautifully to a small screen. The sound quality is excellent and reflects a vocally strong cast that includes tenor Brian Skoog as Harvey Witlow, “The Higgler,” soprano Gabrielle Haigh as Mary Sadgrove, mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Frey as Mrs. Sadgrove, mezzo soprano Denise Milner Howell as Mrs. Witlow, and soprano Lisl Wangerman as Sophy Dawes.

Occasionally reading from a book in an armchair, narrator Joseph Hollings brings a charming accent to the only speaking role in the opera.

The sixteen-piece instrumental ensemble is beautifully integrated with the singers and the orchestration demonstrates Griebing-Haigh’s expertise as an experienced woodwind player herself. Steven Smith brings out the depth of the score, while maintaining excellent coordination between the stage and “pit.”



Marla Berg’s astute and creative direction makes the most of the small stage without ever looking cramped.

Brian Skoog brings his stentorian voice to the expansive role of the title character. Having recently returned from the war, he’s a man searching for answers. Will his business improve? He repeatedly

sings, “if things don’t change and change for the better I cannot last. I may need to return to the land.”

Will his future be with or without his sweetheart Sophy Daws? That question intensifies when he stops in Mrs. Sadgrove’s farm and meets the matriarch’s well-educated daughter Mary, with whom he is smitten at first sight.

Will he or will he not marry his sweetheart Sophy? A full-voiced, feisty Lisl Wangermann would like to know the answer to that question too. The richly hued voice of Denise Milner Howell as his often nagging mother, also wants to know what her son’s future plans are.



Elizabeth Frey is the epitome of a mother out to protect her daughter from the harsh realities of life. Gabrielle Haigh’s beautiful tone, flexible voice and exquisite phrasing embodies the elusive Mary.

As Sophy’s grandmother, mezzo-soprano Kira McGirr makes the most of her brief moment in the spotlight, telling her granddaughter at the wedding that “marriage isn’t everything.”

Indeed marriage is not good for The Higgler. Sophy and his mother argue constantly, as depicted in a comic duet.

At the end Harvey pays a visit to the Sadgrove farm to discover that Mrs. Sadgrove had died earlier that day. “The Higgler” ends with the open question of what its protagonist will do next. Will he help Mary with the farm. Will he become a Bailiff? And what about Sophy?

Like A. E. Coppard’s short story, the opera leaves you with more questions than it answers. We can only assume that in some way, life goes on.

*Top photo by Rob Werman*

*Other Images captured from the video.*

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