

Review: New Voices Opera premieres reflect months of hard work

- By Peter Jacobi | H-T Reviewer | pjacobi@heraldt.com
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It's remarkable. Students with undoubtedly frantic personal agendas decide to do something extra for their fellows and themselves. They believe it's important to give young composers an opportunity to write an opera and ultimately see it performed.

So they start an opera company and call it New Voices Opera. And they hold an annual competition to seek promising creators, put on a public audition featuring pieces of what they believe can best become operas, determine from those entries two that to them hold the most promise, offer commissions, push the two chosen composers to finish their works, a one-act opera from each, and then spend a year readying the pieces for premiere performance.

That means every backstage and onstage step: finding space and coaches and a conductor and stage director for months of preparation and rehearsals, providing a production crew to handle sets and costumes and props, taking care of the where and when those debuts are to be, auditioning singers and casting, putting together an orchestra, dealing with promotion and publicity, seeking funds and supporters to somehow pay for all this and make it happen, plus doing the who-knows-ahead-of-time-the- whatever-elses that come along to accomplish such an endeavor (such as, most likely, helping to find librettists to work with the winning composers).

This has been going on now for five years. For the past several of them, the executive director in charge of the above has been Benjamin Smith, a doctoral student in voice at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music. His various assistants, also, are Jacobs School students, as are most all of the talents. And on Thursday evening, New Voices Opera premiered its two winning operas in splendid, professional-level productions at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater. The evening outside was horrendous, marked by flooding rain, but the event still managed to pretty much fill the house. And those who came turned out to be highly supportive of what they saw and heard from the stage, if applause and cheers are an honest indicator of response.

Both works — "Marilyn's Room" by Kyle Peter Rotolo and "In Memoriam" with music by Matthew Recio and libretto by Molly Korroch — were serious in nature, edging on depressing. But then, these are operas, and what — in content — is so unusual about that? They worked; they left a positive impression. I do often wonder, when hearing contemporary vocal works, why their composers seem to shun melody and choose, instead, a speech-song river of recitative to carry message and music. But on this occasion, at least, the words could be understood, thanks to a balance with the orchestral stream, the clarity of enunciation, the electronic enhancing of the voices and the projection of the words above the stage.

So, too, the speech-song was appropriate to what was happening and being uttered, not following some sort of cliché practice of highs and lows and ups and downs that appear to have no relation at all to content. I could believe this music and also appreciate that both composers proved effective communicators. What they were trying to tell us, they did: with the vocal line and also with highly impressive orchestral scores.

Rotolo's "Marilyn's Room" deals with fame, Hollywood fame, the seeking of it, the finding of it, the failure of finding it, the destructive nature of it, the jealousy and hatred and nasty behavior it can arouse. Tenor Chad DeMaris was well-voiced and sufficiently sleazy as the flesh-seller who sells dreams but cares not if those dreams turn into nightmares, just as long as he profits. My notes are impenetrable about the three women in the story, Diane, Brigitte and Joan, which one is which: the star, the star to be and the star never to be? But sopranos Michelle Lerch and Anne Slovin and mezzo Emily Warren excelled at their duties, messaging haughty contempt, fear and/or envy as dominant factors in unhappy, even tragic lives.

The music for "In Memoriam" by Matthew Recio and the words by Molly Korroch combine effectively to relate a story about Alzheimer's and an intriguing, if outlandish and frightening concept that healing this to-now unhealable condition might be solved by removing all memories attached to a victim's life and then replacing them with new ones, thereby shutting down the former and allowing the patient to live anew but totally removed from his or her past.

Soprano Megan Wilhelm scored as the troubled and confused patient, as did another soprano, Jennie Moser, portraying her don't-know-what-to-do daughter. Two doctors, ready to go forward with the experiment, made strong and seasoned impressions, they being baritone Connor Lidell and soprano Shayna Jones. A more caring and careful doctor, caught up in the tragic situation, was sympathetically portrayed and splendidly vocalized by tenor Darian Clonts.

Michaela Calzaretta conducted both of the operas with authoritative vigor; under her leadership, the orchestra excelled. Meaghan Deiter stage directed what one saw on stage; she maneuvered the performers with obvious purpose.

Quite remarkable, this New Voices Opera.