

OPERA:

7 Operellen

Sirene Opera Theatre

Jugendstiltheater, Vienna

By Larry L. Lash

Performance date: November 17 2004

Had a bomb been dropped on Vienna's Jugendstiltheater last Wednesday, you could kiss contemporary European opera goodbye.

The ever-ingenious folks at Sirene Opera Theatre tapped seven composers spanning three generations and as many librettists for an evening of +Operellen,+ complete operas of 15 minutes' duration utilizing the same characters: Johanna, Johann, a dwarf, a thief, and Voltaire (yes, +that+ Voltaire).

The operas are playfully surreal, wickedly witty. Peter Planyavsky and Walter Titz offered a valentine to Gertrude Stein (and maybe to Kurt Weill, too) in +HerzLosZeitLos.+ Akos Banlaky's tuneful, pungent +Schock+ has Voltaire singing a lipstick jingle. Gilbert Handler keeps things minimal in +Schutt,+ set to Hermes Phettberg's irreverent libretto spiked with an overripe biblical reading. Kurt Schwiertsik, the group's old-timer, offers +The Sleep of the Righteous,+ a lyrical, martial squabble sex farce, quite the most traditionally-composed work.

The most seductive of the lot is Wolfram Wagner's lushly-orchestrated +Stretta,+ redolent of Richard Strauss, containing a lilting waltz and a charming love duet which ends with a list of all the jazz records the couple look forward to sharing, with appropriate musical illustration.

In +The Stolen Heart,+ Jury Everhartz expertly and enchantingly weaves complex neo-baroque elements which begin with a soprano and mezzo intertwined in +a cappella+ duet, and develop into a 21st century madrigal with gorgeous, florid vocal lines.

Christof Dienz uses astringent atonality augmented by a big tenor tune in +The Transposed Heads,+ a dadaist farce in which Johann discards his head for Voltaire's, much to Johanna's horror.

Kristine Tornquist's giddy direction kept the superb, amazingly-versatile ensemble on its toes: Renate Fankhauser (silvery and confident), Shauna Elkin (rich, warm, and wacky), Dan Chamandy (expressive and heroic), Michael Wagner (mellow and plangent), and actor Klaus Rohrmoser (chameleonic and acerbic).

Under Dorian Keilhack, the 11 players of Tyrol's Ensemble for New Music worked miracles with the diverse styles and eccentric orchestrations.

The well-paced evening was vastly entertaining. More than just a reel of disparate coming attractions, +7 Operellen+ exhilaratingly offers assurance that the future of opera is in good hands.

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Rating: 5 stars out of 5