

Broad Street Review



Liebermann: Shades of 'Eugen Onegin.'

Center City Opera's 'Dorian Gray'

BY: **Steve Cohen** 06.11.2007

Lowell Liebermann's opera based on Oscar Wilde's story gets much needed traction in this chamber orchestra version. Liebermann's music is audience-friendly; his instrumentation is modern but the tonality is conservative, which is a logical choice for a story set in Victorian times.

The Picture of Dorian Gray. Opera by Lowell Liebermann; directed by Leland Kimball. Presented through June 12, 2007 by Center City Opera Theater at the Perelman Theater, Kimmel Center, Broad and Spruce Sts. (215) 968-2492 or www.operatheater.org.

An opera about a picture

STEVE COHEN

The story is highly theatrical and the music is emotional and melodious. That should be enough to spell success for Lowell Liebermann's opera, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. But after its well-received initial production in Monte Carlo in 1996, the Met and other major houses have not scheduled Dorian.

I can understand their reluctance. The drama is intimate and the cast is small; only two or three people are on stage most of the time. And Liebermann's big orchestral sound, familiar to audiences at Philadelphia Orchestra and New York Philharmonic concerts, might have swamped the singers.

So Philadelphia's Center City Opera Theater commissioned a "chamber orchestra" version and produced its world premiere. This version is scored for an orchestra of "only" about 30, but it sounds plenty lush and sonorous. The instrumentation is modern but the tonality is conservative, which is a logical choice for a story set in Victorian times.

Voice-friendly, audience-friendly

In the second act, as the protagonist's depravity is revealed, Liebermann uses some dissonance. Even then, however, his music is audience-friendly. He writes gratifyingly for the voice; unlike some other modern operas, we don't hear prolonged declamation that seems to merely accompany the orchestra.

The give-and-take between voice and orchestra at times recalls Tchaikovsky in *Eugen Onegin*. I mean that as a compliment, although some would scoff at the idea of anyone today using such a style.

The composer seems to have fun as he explores the colors of his instruments. You could call Liebermann opera's answer to Martin McDonagh, the playwright of deliciously dark comic dramas about such subjects as child murders in *The Pillowman*. This wit accurately represents Oscar Wilde, who often toyed with his dark subjects.

The Center City production offers excellent acting and good singing by its youngish cast. Matthew Curran portrays the artist who paints a portrait of Dorian as a handsome young man. Jorge Garza is Dorian, who muses that paintings remain ever the same while the subject ages, and pledges his soul to make the opposite occur. Jody Sheinbaum sings Dorian's fiancé, Sibyl Vane. Raymond Ayers is Lord Henry, the friend of both artist and subject.

But what foul deeds did Dorian do?

Henry is said to be a bad influence on Dorian, but the details of this influence aren't spelled out. We see Dorian shooting drugs into his arm; but other than that, we don't see what he's done that's so terrible (until the point in Act II when he kills a man). In this respect, the opera libretto is as circumspect as the 1945, non-musical motion picture. What scandalous deeds, would you guess, did Oscar Wilde imagine?

Visually, even the relatively small Perelman stage is too big for this piece. The set should have

been brought in and forward to reduce the playing space to the approximate size of a 1900 English drawing room. And it would be nice to have the bare stage floor covered with a "carpet strewn with silk, long-fringed Persian rugs," as Wilde described the room. Aside from that, the blocking is effective. Evocative projections of London circa 1900 alternate with enlargements of the painting of Dorian as it ages and becomes ugly.

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