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WILDE AT HEART

by Alex Ross

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Lowell Liebermann is an epicure among American composers, savoring glittery chords, gossamer lines, and velvety textures that more self-consciously intellectual colleagues might be scared to put on paper. He's well equipped to take on Oscar Wilde, and his 1996 opera, "The Picture of Dorian Gray," luxuriates in a suitably eclectic aesthetic language, ranging from the late-Romantic regret of the elder Richard Strauss to the minimalist pizzazz of the young Philip Glass. Center City Opera Theatre, in Philadelphia, recently gave the première of his chamber-orchestra version of "Dorian Gray," which allows the voices to be heard clearly amid the instrumental bacchanalia. Hardworking singers, led by the tenor Jorge Garza, brought to life Wilde's tale of eternal youth and smoldering sin; Andrew Kurtz conducted an often dulcet-toned orchestra. Liebermann's piece is a superior example of the book-club operas that have thrived on American stages in recent years. With one or two cuts in the slightly overlong first act, it might even become a durable classic. ♦



ILLUSTRATION: AKIKO KATO