

An intriguing, well-executed evening of mini-opera

August 28, 2012

BY STEPHEN PEDERSEN | OPERA REVIEW

This begins as a shout-out for pianist Simon Docking.

He accompanied all six mini-operas for piano and solo singer at the final public event of Vocalypse Productions's Opera From Scratch, Sunday afternoon in St. Matthew's United Church.

There are many fine pianists in Nova Scotia who accompany singers as though they were joined at the heart, such as Docking does. But few reach so high a level of penetration and sensitivity, of insight, and absolute technical control, including weight and balance, as well as momentum, imagery and keeping station on the singer through sudden squall and prolonged tempest, that he channels so effortlessly through his articulate fingers.

And none show his genius for opening out a contemporary musical score full of musical brambles and harmonic thickets, to display its intentions to curious ears, simply and clearly revealing its minutest subtleties.

The operas themselves, all not more than 10 minutes long, were written for solo voice and piano and were completed and sent to the composers' designated singers six weeks prior to the workshop. They were performed after an intense week of workshopping six new scores of operas completed six weeks prior to the workshop.

Cry of the Stars, composed by Kala Pierson, was based on a poem by Lorri Nielsen Glenn about mindfulness, breath, and "distillation of complex passions into peaceful focus."

Sung by Montreal soprano Sarah Albu in a sweet, pure voice, the philosophical abstractness of the text took colour from transparent voicings and a line of single notes ringing resonantly in wide leaps over the entire range of the piano.

Florida soprano Emily Thorner, in a simple white dress, and barefooted to suggest a fracturing mind and spirit, sang Evan Meier's colourful, well-balanced score to She Is in the Sea, a tragic monologue based on The Cruel Mother (from the Helen Creighton folksong collection), about a young woman who, after being publicly scorned and reviled for giving birth to a daughter as a result of falling in love with a soldier, threw her infant child into the Sackville River.

The work ended on a notated fadeout as the young woman repeated the phrase "to erase away my shame."

One Thousand Paper Cranes for Japan by Rita Ueda, set to a libretto by Rod Robertson, is based on the tsunami disaster in Japan. Paper cranes are sent to sufferers to wish them a quick recovery. Aleks Burchill, an 8-year-old boy from Dartmouth at the time, began a project to send paper cranes to Japan. (He was on hand for the performance.)

Docking began inside the piano, scraping the bass strings and knocking sharply with his knuckles on the cast-iron frame of the piano, the depressed pedal giving a shimmer to the tones and textures. With a powerful mezzo-soprano voice, Seattle's Cleste Godin maintained a steady course, while piano tremolos, and keyboard long glissandos roared, crashed and banged in the accompaniment.

Of the final three operas, Images of John Wilson by Adam Scime, about a famous Pictou sculptor noted for his American Civil War monuments, was sung by Montreal's Annie Jacques.

Escape To Freedom by Halifax's Sandy Moore set to a libretto inspired by Wolfville's Mona Parsons, who was imprisoned in a Nazi prison camp for three years, was sung by Ottawa alto Megan Johnson, her voice powerfully echoing the expressionistic passages in the dramatic score.

And the concert ended in the sunshine and innocence of Aunt Helen by Monica Pearce, based on Helen Creighton's autobiography My Life in Folklore, sung with easy confidence by Toronto's Maureen Batt, and including Farewell to Nova Scotia.

Over all, the operas were extremely well sung and intriguingly different, although having the words to the librettos would have increased our understanding of what was going on. All of these mini-operas would fit seamlessly into a contemporary art song segment of a solo recital.

To make this creative and original event happen, with obvious benefit to the development of contemporary opera composition and singing, Janice Jackson, artistic director of Vocalypse Productions and producer of Opera From Scratch, assembled a team of first-class mentors.

They included Roberta Barker (dramaturge), Lucy Hayes Davis (voice teacher), Docking (vocal coach and pianist), Jackson (vocal master class and lecturer), Linda Moore (director) and James Rolfe (composer), with special guest lecturer Jennifer Bain (Dalhousie University professor and musicologist).