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Wexford Festival Opera 2022 Review: The Master

Caruso Successfully Transforms Tóibín's Novel About Henry James Into An Opera

By Alan Neilson

(Photo: Padraig Grant)

As part of Artistic Director Rosetta Cucchi's remodeling of the Wexford Festival Opera, the afternoon performances of "opera shorts," shortened versions of well-known operas played to piano accompaniment, have been replaced by a production for young singers from the Wexford Factory program and "pocket operas," new or rarely performed operas, aimed at providing members of the Wexford Opera Chorus with the opportunity to appear in solo roles.

For this year's festival, one of the operas chosen for performance as a pocket opera was "The Master" by Alfredo Caruso, based on Colm Tóibín's novel of the same name. Fittingly, Tóibín, who is also the librettist for the opera, was born in County Wexford and saw his first ever opera performance at the Wexford Festival Opera when he was about 15. Now, living in New York, he returns home for the work's professional world premiere.

"The Master" is a psychological portrait of the US novelist Henry James, developed through a series of encounters with friends and acquaintances over the period January 1895 to October 1899, while James recovers from the failure of his play "Guy Domville" in London, and against the background of Oscar Wilde's flamboyant lifestyle and trial, which scandalized Victorian society. Plagued by his own anxieties, rejection and fears about his own sexuality, James retreated into his writing and his own private space, pushing away those close to him.

The opera is divided into a series of distinct scenes taken directly from the novel, although with omissions and compression, which sharpened the dramatic impact and quickened the pace. The addition of music also added to the psychological depth that the written word cannot easily convey.

Emotionally Strong Score

The composer Alberto Caruso, who accompanied the singers on the piano, created a score that worked on many levels. It was atmospheric and dramatically coherent. Most importantly, however, his writing for the voice was successful in uncovering the deep emotions at play, most obviously in the cases of James and Constance Fenimore Woolson, but also to an extent in the lesser characters, for example Lady Wolseley's pleasure in hoping others succumb to her vicious plans and Andersen's ambitious desire.

Often, voices overlapped, which added to the emotional fabric of the work as well as enhancing the music's textural quality, but without surtitles or a libretto, it meant that the singers' words were inaudible. Caruso's music, however, proved strong enough to carry the narrative.

It was also a well-integrated piece, possessing an overall coherence, moving pleasingly from one scene to the next, and incorporating short choruses, duets and monologues, although it was largely centered on recitative dialogue.

With a running time of an hour and three quarters, it was arguably too long. The unrelenting intensity that carried the audience for most of the performance did start to overwhelm towards the end and would have benefited from a little surgical pruning.

Expert Direction

The direction was in the hands of Conor Hanratty, who did an exceptional job in what was clearly a low-budget production. Each scene was cleverly managed to bring out its dramatic significance, and each character was successfully developed to reveal their personality and psychology. Attention was also given to the positioning of the cast so that the relatively small performing area never appeared overcrowded, and was aesthetically pleasing.

Lisa Krugel, responsible for scenography and costume design, created simple, but imaginative sets that proved to be very effective and also pleasing on the eye. The cast was dressed, as expected, in late Victorian costumes. The props were very basic, but were generally given a low profile so that the focus was on the characters. The narrative moves between various locations, which Krugel successfully managed to suggest. In Rome, for example, the characters were all dressed in light colored clothes, wide brimmed hats and dark glasses, while the performance area was flooded with a bright light designed by Patrick McLaughlin.

The novel is populated by a large number of characters, which Tóibín reduced for the opera. Yet it still has a large number of solo parts, many of which are fairly small. However, even with some of the singers being double-parted, it still required 15 singers just for the solo roles, which with the ensemble parts rose to 17. Without exception, all participated enthusiastically and successfully.

Birch's Compelling Portrait Of James

Tenor Thomas Birch produced a fine performance as the emotionally addled Henry James, who is struggling to come to terms with his homosexuality. In a clearly articulated and expressively believable reading, Birch successfully captured James' insecurities, anxieties and frustrations as he struggled to control his exposure to prying eyes. His recitatives displayed intelligence and insight as he mined the depths of James' troubled psychological state.

The role of Constance Fenimore Woolson was expanded from that of a friend, whose unrequited love for James eventually leads to her suicide, to that of a ghost, whose presence frames the entire opera. She was played by mezzo-soprano Annabella-Vesela Ellis, who expertly captured her concerns and love for James with a strongly sung performance. Her recitatives were expressively and clearly sung, enveloped with emotional strength. She moved easily between calm, reflective passages and anxious, strongly accented lines in which she displayed her bright, piercing upper register to good effect.

Baritone James Wafer was double-parted as James' friend Wendell-Holmes, and Lady Wolseley's servant Hammond. In what were strong performances, he successfully hinted at his characters' ambivalent sexuality. Wafer possesses a well-grounded, secure voice with a warm timbre and a dark undertone. As Wendell-Holmes, he is forced into sharing a room and bed with James. Such was the quality of both singers' acting and singing, that there developed a noticeable tension between them, which allowed a clear light to be shone onto James' sexual anxieties, unambiguously revealing his homosexuality.

Baritone Lawrence Gillians was also cast in two roles. As Edmund Gosse, Henry's friend-cum-gossip, he showed off his darkly colored voice to good effect as he engaged in a tense confrontation with James under the guise of friendly concern, flinging insinuations about his sexuality in his face, in what was a finely crafted, tense episode. In contrast, his portrait of William, Henry's brother, was cold, overbearing and rational, and sung with a measured, almost unemotional demeanor.

The role of the vicious Lady Louisa Wolseley, who happily destroys people for her own entertainment, was played by mezzo-soprano Arlene Belli. She produced a convincing performance that captured Wolseley's judgmental, two-faced nature and her love for scandal in a well-sung performance that showed off her colorful pallet, which she successfully used to flesh out her character.

Baritone Dan D'Souza was parted as Hendrick Christian Andersen, a ruthless, ambitious sculptor intent on exploiting James' sexuality for his own ends. Producing a nuanced, confident performance, he successfully depicted his character's intent, in which his duet with Birch, sung with passion and a swagger, proved to be one of the musical high points of the opera.

Soprano Isabel Araujo produced an expressive performance as James' sister Alice, who is declining with a terminal illness.

Dominica Williams, who played the role of Katherine Loring, produced a gentle, lyrically sensitive, well-articulated performance.

Soprano Zita Syme made a splash with a colorful performance as Mrs. Edward Saker.

Tenor Gabriel Seawright, cast as Mr. Webster, sang with clarity and conviction. His voice displayed a pleasing degree of flexibility.

Tenor Chris Mosz certainly looked the part as the gondolier Tito and produced a pleasingly lyrical performance.

Baritone Andrii Kharlamov produced a solid performance as Johnston, the butler, in which the depth and resonance of his voice impressed.

Smaller roles and ensemble parts were successfully played by sopranos Emma Walsh, Anna Gregg, and Deirdre Higgins, mezzo Emma Jüngling, and tenor Stephen Walker.

On a personal level, "The Master" was very enjoyable, and was certainly the most interesting and successful of the afternoon operas. However, I do wonder about the extent to which the work was accessible to members of the audience who had not read Tóibín's novel. Sitting in the auditorium, I became aware of how I was relating everything to the book. Did the members of the audience who had not read the book know who all the characters were? Did they realize their significance and the backstory that they carried with them, most of which is important to the narrative? I fear that they did not, and so it may have been difficult for them to follow.

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