

OPERA NEWS

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Fidelio, Don Giovanni

NEW YORK CITY

Heartbeat Opera

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FOR THEIR FOURTH ANNUAL Spring Festival, Heartbeat Opera presented Beethoven's Fidelio and Mozart's Don Giovanni in repertory at Baruch Performing Arts Center. In keeping with the company's mission of distilling opera to its essence, both works were reinvented and reinterpreted for the twenty-first century with memorable results. The "Prisoners' Chorus" is not usually the most anticipated moment in Fidelio, but it was the undisputed highpoint in director/adaptor Ethan Heard's update, an incisive and vital commentary on the American justice system (seen May 3). Inmate choruses from six Midwestern correctional facilities sang "O welche Lust," in which a group of political prisoners see sunlight for the first time in weeks. At first, only their voices were heard, rough and raw, but singing the harmonies accurately. When a video was projected on the back wall, we saw men and women of all races and ages, some holding music, some not, with expressions of joy as the music transported them or concentration as they struggled, determined, with the unfamiliar text. This was no mere stunt; it was entirely in keeping with Heard's retelling.

Stan (Florestan) is a Black Lives Matter activist and naturalized citizen in solitary confinement after being arrested unjustly at a protest. Repeated flashes of his subjugation are punctuated by shots from a percussion clapper, as his wife Leah (Leonora) begs her lawyer for help over the phone before collapsing in despair. In a balletic interlude, she dons the uniform of a corrections officer and gets a job at Stan's prison. The contemporary setting means there's no need for Leah to disguise herself as a man, making the infatuated Marcy (Marzelline), an admin at the prison, a lesbian. Marcy's father, head jailer Roc (Rocco), is cool with his daughter's sexuality and tries to make a match between them. (Marcy's suitor, Jaquino, and Don Fernando, the King's minister, are casualties of Heard's adaptation, but neither is missed.) Donnie Pizarro, the fascist warden, is defeated when Leah records and uploads his attempted murder of Stan on her iPhone (which prominently displays an ACLU donation button). Heard's most inspired touch was casting Roc and Marcy with singers of color. Suddenly, Roc's complicity in Stan's imprisonment becomes fraught in a whole new way, and the confrontation between the two men was riveting. (Heard and Marcus Scott replaced the opera's original dialogue with new scenes in English, while the music was sung in German.) Paradoxically, the final revelation that the whole thing was Leah's dream made the story more believable (since it isn't, really), and instead of actually saving her husband, she dons his activist mantle.

Kelly Griffin brought a range of emotional color and a soprano of strength and polish to Leah. She also managed the neat dramatic trick of hiding her fear from the other characters, while letting the audience into

every thought. Although the Angolan tenor Nelson Ebo was recovering from illness, the beauty of his voice was apparent, and he is a compelling actor. His aria, released from heroic pretensions, became even more affecting since the character is, after all, weak and starving. Bass-baritone Derrell Acon was a nuanced and vulnerable Roc, navigating the carefully constructed borders of his life and discovering strength of character under his goofy dad persona. Malorie Casimir was a sweetly girlish Marcy, and Daniel Klein's Pizarro communicated all the awful power of a little man who wants to play in the big leagues.

IN MOST PRODUCTIONS of Don Giovanni, the performers keep their characters' exploding passions hidden under the surface of their good breeding, and when they do act on their impulses, it's with restrained physicality. But in my head, at least, there has always existed a version where there are no holds barred: where Donna Anna knows damn well who's in her bedroom, Donna Elvira means business when she threatens to rip out Giovanni's heart, and Zerlina isn't about to let her bumpkin husband keep her from a sexual adventure with a mysterious older man. Director/adaptor Louisa Proske delivered that version—and more (seen May 4). Every act of sex or violence was fully visible to the audience, leaving no room for ambiguity, starting with the first duet. Donna Anna and Don Giovanni are discovered having wild, enthusiastic sex, with her cries of help simply part of their roleplay. The Commendatore then becomes the intruder, dying on Anna's childhood bed by the knife she used to threaten Giovanni while tying him up with her stockings. In this context, Anna's guilt, adoption of piety, and passive-aggressive treatment of Ottavio makes complete sense. Elvira was still a vengeful fury, but her abiding lust for Giovanni constantly battled for dominance, and one got the sense that if she did successfully excise his heart, she might eat it. The gum-cracking Zerlina, in a white tutu and black leather jacket, and only a few years past her quinceañera, made Giovanni work for her acquiescence, which was as much buyer's remorse after what amounted to a sung screaming match with Masetto. Giovanni was a wily, dangerous predator, but too ego-driven to realize the women are smarter. The characters' unbridled passions snowballed brilliantly towards Giovanni's hedonistic blowout, complete with photo booth, vodka shots and cocaine, and instead of the principals beating Leporello in Act Two thinking he's Giovanni, they attacked the real Don after his attempted rape of Zerlina at the party.

While Act I had a few judicious nips and tucks, most of Act II went missing to accommodate Proske's vision. "Deh vieni alla finestra" became a coda at the end of the first act, with a practically naked Giovanni being disinfected or undergoing some sort of purification ritual by a lab worker. After intermission, it became clear that Giovanni was in a hospital, although it was unclear whether it was for rehab, a psychotic break, recovery from his injuries or some combination of the three. The others gathered in the waiting room, and the reordered Act Two, which began with Elvira singing "Mi tradi" while undergoing a polygraph, became a series of detached vignettes. Giovanni's interactions with Leporello were hallucinations, and the Commendatore was a doctor who resembled the dead man. Giovanni's demise was engineered by electroshock therapy, a bold, harsh, and unforgiving end to the libertine in the age of #metoo. Unfortunately, there is no place more enervating than a hospital waiting room, and this one proved no different. The disconnected character spotlights, while interesting in isolation, deflated the narrative urgency Proske built so expertly in the first act.

All the singers lived the words they sang and listened actively to one another, especially when they were on the receiving end of an aria. Leela Subramaniam captured Anna's torment and transformation with a glossy, vibrant soprano. Felicia Moore's Elvira offered the ideal mix of steel, beauty and vehemence, while Samarie Alicea's spitfire, low-rent Zerlina was warmly sung and ferociously entertaining. John Taylor Ward was a lithe, louche and admirably game Giovanni, singing with a buoyant bass-baritone that became seductively tender with Zerlina and smoothly articulate in "Finch'han dal vino." Matthew Gamble's Leporello was a street-smart procurer who seemed closer to a proactively thinking Figaro than the usually put-upon servant. Barrington Lee did impressive double duty as the Commendatore and Masetto, slipping so completely into each character that only his round, resonant bass-baritone gave him away. Keith Browning was an eager, active Ottavio, who seemed less like a pushover without his two arias.

Both productions featured energetic playing from the chamber ensembles, led by Dan Schlossberg (Fidelio) and Jacob Ashworth (Don Giovanni), with prominently featured clarinet in the latter that reflected Mozart's fascination with the emerging instrument. Sets and costumes were evocative and rooted in plot and character, supporting the visions of both directors and making economical use of the flexible space. —
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