

CLASSICAL MUSIC PETER G. DAVIS

Hello, Mother

At Santa Fe's summer festival, a new opera that for once is defined and driven by music, and fine music at that. 'Emmeline' is a barrowing update on Oedipus.

AVISIT TO JOHN CROSBY'S FAMOUS OPERA FESTIVAL way out West in Santa Fe is always a pleasure, but this summer's contemporary novelty—the world premiere of *Emmeline*, by Tobias Picker—made the trip especially worthwhile. Unlike some tyros who have lately won much publicity playing the opera game, Picker, at 42, is a New York-born composer of proven substance and dramatic flair, who refutes the old saw that first operas and newborn kittens are best drowned at birth. The promise was always there, and some of us noticed a distinctly operatic flavor about the score for piano and orchestra that brought Picker wide attention back in 1983—*Keys to the City*, an exuberant tribute to the Brooklyn Bridge on its centenary and probably the most exhilarating piece of American urban music since Bernstein's *Fancy Free*.

Emmeline calls for a more interior but just as intense response, and Picker has provided it. Based on Judith Rossner's novelization of the true-life tragedy of Emmeline Mosher, the tale begins in 1841 when a 13-year-old girl from Maine is sent by her needy family to work in a Massachusetts textile mill. After the lonely and confused teenager is seduced by her employer's son-in-law, she gives birth to a child who is immediately placed with foster parents. Time passes, and Emmeline is still nursing her guilty secret when she meets a young man named Matthew, falls in love, and marries him, unaware that he is the very son she gave up twenty years earlier. When the truth comes out, Matthew leaves in horror, the community is unforgiving, and the delirious *Emmeline* is left to face life in bitter isolation.

Aside from being a new opera that, for once, is defined and driven by music of quality, *Emmeline* is remarkable for containing a central role designed to flatter the voice and probe a character's emotional dilemma through flexibly contoured, expressively exploratory vocal lines. That used to be a basic requirement for all successful operas from Monteverdi to Puccini, but most of the new American works that now proliferate are by composers with scant understanding of how the voice works and what it can do best. Picker has this know-how, and he almost always finds exactly the right emotional tone and shapely lyrical phrase to portray Emmeline's various moods, concluding

with a final monologue of heart-wrenching power and beauty. The role is a gift to a talented lyric soprano, and Patricia Racette seized the moment; not many singers receive a standing ovation at the end of a new opera, a tribute to both Racette's compelling performance and Picker's compositional skill.

The score shows a softening of Picker's manner, and some may be distressed to find the composer moving further away from the tough angular expressionism of his earlier scores and into a more tonal idiom—viewed as a whole, the opera could almost be called a two-hour elegy in B-flat minor. Some hear the influence of Barber and Copland, but perhaps more useful reference points would be the conservatively styled, eminently singable operas of Thomas Pasatieri (now vanished from the scene, but whose works were played everywhere on the regional circuit twenty years ago) and Carlisle Floyd, although Picker composes with more elegance than the former and more sophistication than the latter. Hard edges are there when needed, however, particularly in the relentless music of the dehumanizing textile machines as well as in a flavoring of pop and minimalism whenever those techniques are helpful in creating the right musical atmosphere.

Emmeline has so much quality that I hope Picker will one day rethink those parts of the score that don't work and correct them. J. D. McClatchy's libretto has the virtues of theatrical clarity and a genuine poetic touch, but several characters remain so sketchy due to excessive plot compression that even the most inspired music is unable to fill in the gaps. The romantic relationship

Magnum Oprah:
Patricia Racette,
Melanie
Saraksannis,
and Victor
Ledbetter in
Emmeline.



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between Emmeline and Matthew, for example, proceeds far too rapidly for dramatic credibility, and that removes much of the tale's deadly sting. The ensemble that leads into the finale is also too short-winded and underdeveloped, never delivering the cathartic punch that the composer clearly aims for. Possibly Picker was pressured to deliver an opera that lasted no more than two hours in order to accommodate the scheduled PBS telecast next April. If so, second thoughts, revisions, and expansion of key scenes would surely give the opera even more strength and profile in future performances.

Designed by Robert Israel, the austere production was dominated by Emmeline's omnipresent bed and a huge black crucifix that slashed a wall like a vicious ax—strong symbols of the forces of sex and religion that lie at the heart of this bleak New England Oedipal tragedy. Without neglecting individual personalities or effective theatrical confrontations, Francesca Zambello staged the opera with economy and swift strokes, correctly treating the piece as a stylized ritual rather than a realistic melodrama. Racette's radiant soprano and appealingly vulnerable presence dominated the action, but there was also much to admire in Curt Peterson's lyrical Matthew, Kevin Langan's unyielding Henry Mosher, and Anne-Marie Owens's dour Aunt Hannah. George Manahan seemed captivated by the score's piquant instrumental color, harmonic lushness, and eagerness to communicate, and his confident conducting brought out the music's best points.

The other two festival productions I looked in on—Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* and Richard Strauss's *Daphne*—were distinctly underenergized compared with *Emmeline*. One had the feeling of time being marked as Santa Fe steels itself for inevitable change after 40 years of rule by founder and general director John Crosby, now 70—speculation and rumors of succession were rife. More positively, the theater itself is soon to undergo an extensive renovation that will increase seating capacity, put a roof over the exposed midsection of the auditorium, and allow for the possibility of an electronic back-of-the-seat English titling system resembling the one adopted by the Metropolitan Opera.

Crosby himself presided over the orchestra for *Daphne*, and if he is not the most fluent conductor of his favorite composer, his interpretation of the score was at least affectionate. The Santa Fe Opera, in fact, is practically the only company in America that regularly produces this one-act "bucolic tragedy," first performed in 1938 and ushering in the glowing Indian-summer creations of Strauss's old age—the final shimmering sequence,

describing the nymph Daphne's transformation into a laurel tree, is one of the composer's most ravishing inspirations.

The title role requires all the virtues of the typical Strauss soprano: tonal opulence, soaring high notes, declamatory eloquence, and a warm feminine presence. A striking blonde beauty from England, Janice Watson filled the bill splendidly, and Santa Fe seems to have found a Strauss soprano to conjure with—next summer, she returns as Arabella. The composer always claimed to hate tenors, and the punishing music he wrote for Apollo would seem to prove it. Frederic Kalt managed the difficulties well enough with his huge voice, and the smaller parts—Leukippos (Mark Thomsen), Gaea (Ellen Rabiner), Peneios (Dale Travis)—were all in reliable hands. Unfortunately, Carl Friedrich Oberle's scrappy set, a drab Arcadian landscape lined by tiny closet doors for the principals to crawl through, proved an eyesore, and Rosamund Gilmore's clumsy stage direction completely failed to capture the pathos and God-in-nature mystery of this delicate mythic tragedy.

Weak production values also sabotaged a mostly promising cast for *The Rake's Progress*. The martini-dry wit of the Auden-Kallman text and Stravinsky's elegant neoclassical forms wilted badly under James Robinson's flaccid direction and Kenneth Montgomery's limp conducting, although Bruno Schwengl's stylish painterly sets struck the right Hogarthian tone. Nothing the composer wrote cuts more deeply than Anne Trulove's poignant leave-taking of Tom in Bedlam, ingeniously intensified here when the charming rustic backdrop of the opening scene reappeared, soiled and torn, to become the mad rake's shroud. The scene in Mother Goose's brothel was also nicely spiced by an antic crowd of whores and "roaring boys," delighted to watch the madam and Tom consummate their lustful evening in a steaming bathtub.

Richard Croft (Tom) and Richard Cowan (Nick) would probably be more effective adversaries in a production that had the benefit of stronger musical and dramatic direction, although it would be hard to find a more flavorful portrait than Judith Christian's exotic bearded Baba the Turk. As Anne, Sylvia McNair may have been treated as the star of the show, but her once-pretty soprano seems to have permanently slipped out of focus, and her singing was disappointingly shapeless. Beyond that, such irritating look-at-me diva posturing has no place in this opera. It was sad to see Santa Fe standards slipping with *Daphne* and *The Rake*. Apparently the festival channeled most of its energies into Picker's strong new opera this summer, and perhaps that's as it should be. ■