

# OPERA REVIEW; Exploring The Heart Of Lyrical Americana

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## OPERA REVIEW

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Tobias Picker's "Emmeline" at the New York City Opera is of modest scale and manageable ambition. It deals with plain people and serious matters, neither overreaching nor understating its agenda. An admirable sense of self results in affecting simplicity. The City Opera should put "Emmeline" in its permanent repertory. It is a model of its kind.

On Tuesday, Mr. Picker's new opera, new to New York at least, also enjoyed a staging that synchronized theatrical to musical values. Francesca Zambello's production understands how this opera's music works and provides stage pictures and a sense of motion that match it precisely.

"Emmeline" derives from a bit of American oral history as reconstituted in a novel by Judith Rossner. The settings are rural Maine and industrial Massachusetts. The heroine is a teen-ager in the middle of the 19th century sent to work in the textile mills. She is seduced by the mill owner's son-in-law, and the child she bears him is taken from her and placed she knows not where.

Emmeline returns to her family, lives chastely for 20 years, then meets and marries a young railroad worker who, as she discovers at her mother's

funeral, is her son.

Mr. Picker has a true ear for lyrical run-on musical sentences. They ride gracefully and take interesting directions. The language is tonal, and Mr. Tobias's particular dialect has a soothing effect. Dissonance seems to be more a theatrical than a musical tool. Factory scenes turn harsh, as do moments of personal confrontation. "Emmeline" promotes an old habit of music that three generations of nontonalists have been unable to break: that harmony of the spirit equals musical consonance. "Emmeline" is in constant though never hectic motion. In private scenes, the orchestra provides a measured heartbeat. On the mill floor, it becomes a busy set of gears and whistles against which the voices sing. Sometimes the music is taken from the vernacular: period songs or Protestant anthems.

Ms. Zambello and her designer, Robert Israel, achieve much the same effect. Several blank walls roll in and out of place, manipulated by the female choristers. A rectangular pit in the middle of the stage serves both as grave and as factory workplace. The mill work itself is robotic and choreographed. So discreet and natural are the changes of scene that we are never distracted by stagecraft for its own sake.

Patricia Racette in the title role is a happy bit of casting. The part is not a virtuoso one, nor does it particularly try the parameters of a normal soprano voice. It does require, however, an unforced naturalness and an unconscious purity of spirit. Ms. Racette projects both very well. Emmeline's unfortunate relationships with men are personified here by Victor Ledbetter (Mr. Maguire, the seducer) and Curt Peterson (Matthew Gurney, the son).

Anne-Marie Owens (Aunt Hannah) sings with a quiet dignity fairly typical of the evening. Indeed, Ms. Zambello is wise in the ways of human action and reaction and has stripped "Emmeline" of the usual set of operatic histrionics. The rest of the cast all sing very well, and when not sorely pressed, the City Opera's orchestra plays affectingly; in the busier sections, winds and brass on either side of the pit had troubles getting together.

After wading through so many bad new American operas over the last 17 years, it is a pleasure to come across one that works this well. "Emmeline" has gauged its materials and the means to convey them and done so wisely. It is not much more than two hours long. There are few dead spots to slow it down; and at the end, our hearts are touched. Tuesday's audience liked "Emmeline" very much, and with reason.

## EMMELINE

Opera in two acts by Tobias Picker, libretto by J. D. McClatchy, after the novel by Judith Rossner; conductor, George Manahan; production by Francesca Zambello; sets by Robert Israel; costumes by Dunya Ramicova; lighting by Amy Appleyard. At the New York City Opera.

WITH: Patricia Racette (Emmeline Mosher), Curt Peterson (Matthew Gurney), Victor Ledbetter (Mr. Maguire), Anne-Marie Owens (Aunt Hannah Watkins), Kevin Langan (Henry Mosher), Kimm Julian (Hooker), Jennifer Dudley (Ella Burling), Melanie Sarakatsannis (Sophie), Josepha Gayer (Mrs. Bass), David Hutchinson (Mr. Summers), Joyce E. Greene (Mrs. Maguire), Marc Embree (Simon Fenton), Herbert Perry (Pastor Avery), Deanne Meek (Harriet Mosher) and Kristen Garver (Sarah Mosher).

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