

A Reunion Born of Tragedy

By Heidi Waleson Sept. 18, 2009 5:56 am ET

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I saw Tobias Picker's powerful first opera, "Emmeline," at its Santa Fe Opera premiere in 1996, and again at the New York City Opera in 1998. Ever since, it has been a measure by which I assess the theatrical impact of other new operas. With its poetic, streamlined libretto by J.D. McClatchy and Mr. Picker's vivid score, this two-hour opera is continuously gripping, without a wasted note or word. Inexplicably, it has not had much of a life beyond those original stagings, though the Santa Fe production was broadcast on PBS's "Great Performances" and recorded on Albany Records. However, last weekend, Dicapo Opera, where Mr. Picker serves as artistic adviser, remedied that. This new production, a collaboration with the Opera Competition and Festival With Mezzo Television, travels to Hungary in November.

"Emmeline" held up well in its transition to a small (204-seat) theater, a reduced orchestration of 23 instruments, and a different directorial concept. The story, based on a novel by Judith Rossner, begins in 1841, when 14-year-old Emmeline is sent to work in a Massachusetts mill to earn money for her family. Seduced by the factory supervisor, she gives birth to a child, who is given away. Twenty years later, Emmeline, still dreaming of her child, whom she thinks was a girl, meets and falls in love with a young man. She marries him and discovers too late that he is her son.



Kristin Sampson and Zoltán Nyári in Tobias Picker's "Emmeline."

Sarah Shatz

The original production was spare; this one, directed by Róbert Alföldi, was even more so. John Farrell's set design featured window-shade like panels that rolled up and down at the back and sides of the stage, surrounding the mostly empty space in black or white. Susan Roth did the ominous lighting. A square overhead fixture illuminated an area at the center of the stage and a rectangular black crate was intermittently dragged there to serve as a bed and a bier, but also as a kind of sacrificial altar where Emmeline is violated and gives birth. Sándor Daróczi's mostly modern costumes also helped unmoor the story from its 19th-century setting, making this story of transgression more universal. This stark, abstract style made Dicapo's small stage feel large, conveying Emmeline's loneliness without undercutting the intimacy afforded by this unusually small theater.

Mr. Alföldi's direction stressed ritualistic movement, giving a Greek-chorus-

like feel to the mechanized motions of the factory girls brandishing rolls of fabric and the massing of the chorus as it brands Emmeline an outcast, first for her pregnancy and then for incest. He made Aunt Hannah, the stern moralist who gives Emmeline's baby away and then reveals the truth 20 years later, into a Nemesis figure in a long, witchlike black dress. The unsentimental directing also brought out an underlying theme in the opera about the weakness of the men and the stoic strength of the women. "You must never be afraid," Hannah tells Emmeline, who, despite censure by the town, refuses at the end to run away in shame.

Much of the theatricality of Mr. Picker's tonal score lies in how he gives each scene a distinct rhythmic and melodic character, and never lets one go on too long. Exposition, character development and emotional intensity are experienced simultaneously through well-constructed vocal writing and precise orchestration. The heavy funeral dirge for Emmeline's baby sister, which opens the opera, gives way immediately to the frantic asymmetry of the factory music and, later, to the lyric dreaminess of the lonely Emmeline as she gives in to her seducer. In the final 10 minutes, Mr. Picker brings back themes from the rest of the opera, skillfully weaving them into a flashback reverie that cements our understanding of the heroine's determination.

With her big, gleaming dramatic soprano, Kristin Sampson brought authority to the tour-de-force role of Emmeline, though more vulnerability would have rounded out the character further. As Aunt Hannah, Iulia Merca overacted her Nemesis role a bit, but her mezzo voice was firm and imposing. Tenor Zoltán Nyári was vocally uneven as Matthew, Emmeline's suitor and son, and his Hungarian accent was sometimes jarring in the English text. Soprano Lynne Abeles gave a standout performance as Sophie, the factory girl who befriends Emmeline; Zeffin Quinn Hollis was suitably smarmy as Mr. Maguire, Emmeline's seducer; and Christina Rohm was fierce as her sister Harriet. Lisa Chavez, Sam Smith and David Gagnon contributed ably in supporting roles. Conductor Samuel Bill, who also arranged the chamber-orchestra version, paced the evening skillfully, and there was some impressive playing,

particularly from the French horns and percussion. But, in general, the orchestra sounded scrappy and underrehearsed.

Two of Mr. Picker's subsequent operas, "Thérèse Raquin" and "An American Tragedy," were based on similarly Gothic tales, yet neither had the stripped-down, uncompromising intensity of "Emmeline." By fearlessly embracing the ugly side of their source material and resisting the urge to excess, Mr. Picker and Mr. McClatchy created a work with enduring value. More people should have a chance to see it.

—*Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.*