

James Karas – Reviews and Views

PASSIONS – PERGOLESI AND DAVID LANG DOUBLE BILL AT GLIMMERGLASS FESTIVAL

Friday, August 9, 2013



Soprano Nadine Sierra and countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo in Stabat Mater. Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival.

Reviewed by James Karas

PASSIONS is the title of a double bill presented at the Glimmerglass Festival. It is in fact a triple bill consisting of **Stabat Mater** by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi and two pieces by David Lang, **The Little Match Girl Passion** and **When We Were Children**. The Lang and Pergolesi pieces have some things in common but in the end they are completely different.

The *Stabat Mater* is, of course, a musical setting of the suffering of the Virgin Mary. The idea and the image of Mary standing by the cross of her crucified Son has enthralled hundreds of composers who have tried to give musical expression to her agony.

Director and Choreographer Jessica Lang has created a stage work from Pergolesi's beautiful music. The vocal parts are taken by countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo and soprano Nadine Sierra. They are simply outstanding as they sing of the pain of the Virgin. The Latin of the hymn is very simple and the expression of pain and grief straightforward but Pergolesi raises the simple verses into something ethereal and extraordinary.

Lang has choreographed a moving ballet around the music and singing enhancing the vocal expression of Mary's anguish. The eight dancers roll on the floor, undulate their torsos and provide an extravaganza of motion that is simply marvelous.

Set designer Marjorie Bradley Kellog has largely taken Christianity out of the most of Christian of settings. The action takes place in an inverted V on the stage and the most prominent feature of the set is a denuded tree trunk in a vertical position. Another trunk is lowered in horizontal position and there is an indication of a cross but the production eschews obvious references to Christianity. The two trunks take various positions as they are maneuvered but they never take the true form of a Christian cross or indicate the crucifixion directly.

Speranza Scappucci conducts The Glimmerglass Festival Orchestra in a crisp and precise performance of the Baroque music. The production is a marvel of concision and imagination where a piece of sacred music is turned into a universal paean to suffering.

From Pergolesi we move to David Lang's new composition, ***When We Were Children***. The Glimmerglass Festival Children's Chorus lines up across the stage and sings a choral piece based on **1 Corinthians 13:11**. In the King James Version it reads: *When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things*. Lang uses many variations of St. Paul's words for his piece.

The Little Match Girl Passion is more ambitious. The story is based on Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Match Girl* and it is dramatic enough. A little girl is selling matches on the streets of New York on New Year's Eve. No one is buying her matches and she starts lighting them one by one. They provide little warmth and she dies of cold and is transfigured.

There is a vocal ensemble of four (Julia Mintzer, James Michael Porter, Lisa Williamson and Christian Zaremba), all members of the of Glimmerglass's Young Artists Program. Aside from some percussion accompaniment, the singing was done *a capella*. This is no doubt a matter of taste, but Lang's music did nothing for me. It was repetitive, monotonous and unmoving. I hasten to add that Lang won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for *The Little Match Girl Passion*. As happens so often, there is no accounting for taste and I mean mine.

Passions a double bill consisting of *Stabat Mater* by Giovanni Pergolesi and ***The Little Match Girl Passion*** and ***When We Were Children*** by David Lang opened on July 20 and will be performed eight times until August 20, 2013 at the Alice Busch Opera Theater, Cooperstown, New York. Tickets and information (607) 547-0700 or www.glimmerglass.org