

'Passions' is somber and austere

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Joseph Dalton

Cooperstown

If you've been having too much fun at the Glimmerglass Festival lately, "Passions" is payback. The new double bill of Renaissance and contemporary pieces, which opened on Saturday night, is somber and austere.

Neither of the two works, Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater" and Lang's "The Little Match Girl Passion," was conceived as an opera. Though each focuses on a grim instance of raw humanity, the effort to bring them to the stage turns out to be more admirable than eloquent.

The Pergolesi comes first and features terrific singing by soprano Nadine Sierra and counter tenor Anthony Roth Costanzo. Speranza Scappucci conducts a string orchestra that's also in fine fettle.

Choreographer Jessica Lang integrates the two onstage singers into the action of her company of eight dancers. The images of the sorrowful mother and the victim on the cross are alluded to repeatedly, but are seldom blunt or explicit. Just as frequent are suggestions of supplication and exaltation and the imagery is often captivating. The giant tree trunks, which frame the stage and change configurations repeatedly, are a bit distracting. A large bolt of fabric covers the women at the beginning and is later draped on a branch that floats above.

After intermission, a large children's chorus takes the stage via the aisles of the theatre. Their heavy dark, winter clothing suggests a Dickens story. Sitting and facing the audience head on, they sing "When We Were Children," a new work by Lang commissioned by Glimmerglass as a prelude to his larger piece. It's the last tuneful music of the night.

"The Little Match Girl Passion" is a kind of oratorio for four vocal soloists, who recount the familiar tale through music that's rhythmically complex, and lightly textured but almost always dronelike. There's an aspect of ritual in that the singers occasionally play percussion instruments. All this takes place to one side of the stage and is executed with cool precision.

Director Francesca Zambello uses the children's chorus for a staging of the bitter tale. They also join in singing some portions of the music and occasionally interact with the soloists. It's not hard to imagine a successful visual treatment of Lang's passion if it shared the same distance and isolation that's in the slow-moving music. But this staging is crowded and heavy. The tragedy of the little match girl is her abandonment and the only witnesses needed are the audience.

Review

"Passions"

A new double bill of works by Pergolesi and Lang

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Glimmerglass Festival, Cooperstown

Length: One hour, 45 minutes with one intermission