

CNY Café Momus

Glimmerglass's handsomely staged 'Passions' expands the boundaries of oratorio

The double-bill program of sacred vocal works uses choreography, sets and costumes to heighten the drama within the music

David Abrams
July 20, 2013

Passions seem to be running high at Glimmerglass Festival.

The company's ambitious double-bill program, carrying the title *Passions*, takes a pair of sacred vocal masterpieces written some 270 years apart and turns up the drama by adding staging and costumes. The finished product produces a handsome visual experience that complements the music.

The title of the program is somewhat misleading, given that neither Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* nor David Lang's *The Little Match Girl Passion* fits the definition of a passion: a story recounting the suffering of Christ at the Cross. Nor do these works fit the definition of an oratorio or cantata, due to the staging. But whatever you prefer to call it, it's clear that the present reworking of these pieces adds an appealing visual element to an already potent musical experience.

The *Stabat Mater in C Minor*, which gets my vote for the artistic highlight of the evening, was Pergolesi's final composition: He succumbed to consumption in 1736, shortly after finishing the work. He was 26 years old. The oratorio for soprano and alto soloists with strings and continuo enjoyed widespread popularity — both within and beyond the Baroque era. (Listeners familiar with the film *Amadeus* will no doubt recognize the final measures of the concluding *Amen*, which is quoted in the film.)

The quality of musical performance in this Glimmerglass production, buoyed by a pair of first-rate vocal soloists and the meticulous direction of conductor Speranza Scappucci, was outstanding. So, too, was Jessica Lang's choreographed body movement — which resonated well with the deep pathos of the music.

The dancers were often synchronized in coordinated motions with the vocal soloists, as if paired in a dramatic *pas de deux* of pain and anguish. Indeed, the writhing and twisting of bodies, along with contrasts of shadow and light made possible by Mark McCullough's lighting effects, reminds me of figures in a Caravaggio painting. The minimalist set comprising two giant logs slowly changed position to suggest everything from trees to The Last Supper and the Crucifixion.

The decision to substitute a countertenor for the more customary alto or mezzo-soprano soloist afforded Anthony Roth Costanzo an opportunity to showcase his considerable powers of expression. Costanzo, whom some may remember as Ferdinand in the Metropolitan Opera's Baroque fantasy pastiche, *The Enchanted Island*, simulcast live in HD a year ago January, produced a pure and creamy male alto that blended smoothly with Nadine Sierra's silky soprano.

The flexibility of Costanzo's vocal timbre was especially apparent in those numbers involving trills and other ornaments — such as the *Quae moerebat et dolebat*, which he performed handsomely in-sync with

the dancers. His stark dynamic shifts in the *Quis non posset contristari* at the end of the duet with Sierra were particularly effective. I was especially moved by Costanzo's deeply expressive vocal delivery, and the smoothly shaped movement of his arms and torso throughout the dramatic and stately *Eja mater fons amoris*.

Like Costanzo, Sierra's soprano was full of expression and color, and the movement of her body in tandem with the dancers looked natural and effortless. This combination of sweetness and passion was apparent early on, beginning with the *Cujus animam gementem* — a lamentful aria that shows off her rich and mellow lower register. Sierra is secure in the higher register as well, as evident in her tender duet *O quam tristis*, sung in thirds with the second vocal part. Sierra's dexterous execution of the rapid trills and ornaments in the duet *Fac, ut ardeat con meum* (one of the rare fast numbers in this oratorio) was particularly impressive.

The most effective use of the set comes at the mournful final number, *Quando corpus morietur* — the evocative duet that precedes the concluding *Amen*. For me, this was the most emotionally charged number in the piece. Here, the staging helps capture the mood of resignation as the logs join together to forge a long table that seats the dancers — symbolizing The Last Supper.

Audience reaction to the performance was swift and uniform — an immediate and prolonged standing ovation peppered with voracious shouts of approval for the soloists, conductor, instrumentalists, dancers, choreographer and set director (Marjorie Bradley Kellogg).

David Lang's *The Little Match Girl Passion*, based largely upon a Hans Christian Anderson tale, tells the story of a poor young girl (Victoria Munro) forced by her cruel father to sell matches in the streets on New Year's Eve. Barefoot, cold and hungry, the little girl strikes match after match trying to keep warm, but — spoiler alert! — she will not live to see the start of the new year.

As was the case with the *Stabat Mater*, dramatic potency is heightened as a direct result of the staging — which in this case is dominated by the presence of a 24-voice children's chorus costumed to look like characters in the Broadway musical, *Oliver!* A steady stream of falling snowflakes (a nice touch by Director Francesca Zambello) evokes the coldness of the streets and reminds us that the warmth of the Christmas season is not within reach of all.

In spite of the handsome visuals, however, Lang's music — which is remarkably effective in the sparsely voiced original with a quartet of singers doubling on percussion instruments — loses much of its intimacy and focus in the larger, staged setting of the work. Indeed, it was the chamber version of *The Little Match Girl Passion*, and not Lang's subsequent choral arrangement, that earned the 2008 Pulitzer Prize in music. (A convincing recording of the original version with Paul Hillier's Theater of Voices is available on the *Harmonia Mundi* label.)

Lang's writing in this piece may best be described as a synthesis musical styles from both past and present, bonded together with post-minimalist techniques such as unrelenting repetition of melodic patterns, overlapping rhythms and painstakingly slow harmonic motion (speed of the chord changes).

Critics have likened the meditative quality of Lang's music to plainchant, but a more accurate comparison would be the vocal polyphonic styles of the Medieval and Renaissance eras, including 13th century *cantus firmus* techniques (where the lower part moves much slower than the rest), as well as elements from 15th century motets and 16th century madrigals. But once you abandon the intimacy of a one-on-a-part performance, you forfeit much of its meditative and personal appeal, as well. In the end, the presence of the chorus in Lang's work provided more of a distraction than a musical complement.

Because Lang treats the four voices as quasi-contrapuntal independent melodic lines, it's a constant challenge for the singers to blend sound and match pitches with any degree of consistency. The four *Glimmerglass Young Artists program* soloists — soprano Lisa Williamson, mezzo-soprano Julia Mintzer, tenor James Michael Porter and bass Christian Zarembo — did justice to this work, and each delivered an impressive individual effort. There were occasional moments where blend of tone sounded choppy and pitch among the four was questionable. Still, the overall effort was impressive. Credit James Michael Porter with navigating the upper tenor register with apparent ease and stability.

The large but well-disciplined children's chorus moved about the stage gracefully under the preparation and guidance of choreographer Andrea Beasom (another *Glimmerglass Young Artist*), and the chorus maintained a pleasant and homogenous blend of tone. Many of Lang's sonorities, however, proved a bit too challenging for the youngsters, who struggled with intonation issues throughout the performance.

I expect many of these performance problems will iron themselves out over the course of the production run. *The Little Match Girl Passion* is a masterpiece of contemporary dramatic vocal writing, but it takes a first-rate performance to do it justice. It's well worth the effort. And passion.

Details Box:

What: *Passions*, a double-bill program comprising Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* and David Lang's *The Little Match Girl Passion*

When: July 20, 2013

Who: Glimmerglass Festival

Where: 7300 State Highway 80, Cooperstown, N.Y.

Time: About 1:45 minutes, with one intermission

Call: Glimmerglass Box office: (607) 547-2255, or glimmerglass.org

Ticket prices: \$10 to \$132 (discounts for students, educators and seniors)

Website: www.glimmerglass.org

Remaining performances: 8 p.m. Aug. 3; 7:30 p.m. Aug. 9; 1:30 p.m. Aug. 18; 7:30 p.m. Aug. 22