

Opera Warhorses

Glimmerglass Festival Presents David Lang's "The Little Match Girl Passion"

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The 2013 Glimmerglass Festival alternates in rotation four musical evenings, of which one is a double bill whose two parts are entitled "Passions".

I have strongly recommended the first half of the double bill, the "Stabat Mater" [See Superlative: Anthony Roth Costanzo, Nadine Sierra, Ensemble Dancers Superb in Jessica Lang's Visualization of Pergolesi's Stabat Mater – Glimmerglass Festival, July 20, 2013.]

For those considering the first half of the double bill, I wanted to record my thoughts on the second part, consisting of a new work by David Lang, *When We Were Children*, for children's chorus composed for the Glimmerglass Festival and dedicated to its General and Artistic Director Francesca Zambello.

Lang was also the composer for the principal work of the evening's second half, "The Little Match Girl Passion".

[*Right: Composer David Lang; edited image, based on a promotional photograph.*]

The choral work, whose world premiere was enchantingly sung by the Glimmerglass Festival Children's Chorus, was directed by David Moody. It was Moody who also conducted the "Match Girl Passion"

A Double Bill's Raison d'être

Even though the double bill consists of seemingly disparate works, the two parts of the double bill do have a substantive link to which the title "Passions" relates.

Each part describes a tragic scene – the grief of a mother at the torture and death of her son and the death through freezing of a



child during the Christmas season. The lyrics for both are comprised of the narratives of observers describing the sad events.



[Left: the Little Match Girl (Victoria Munro) attempts to warm her hands by lighting a match; edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Festival.]

The Pergolesi “Stabat Mater”, although not without controversy at the time it premiered, still was composed within the framework of early 18th century Italian church music. The music for the “passion” struck some of Pergolesi’s contemporaries as too theatrical for a

solemn church service.

Those of us witnessing the extraordinary performance at this Glimmerglass Festival, whose performance was a stellar theatrical experience, might concede that the 18th century critics were, in a way, perceptive.

21st century Composer Lang himself was interested in the idea of the passion – vocal music focusing on a person’s sorrows – especially Bach’s “St Matthew’s Passion”. In time he was drawn to the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale about a girl who sold matches to bring a bit of income to an impoverished family.

Unable to sell her matches during a freezing cold night during the Christmas holidays, she lit what she had to warm her hands, but was found frozen to death the next morning.

Lang's "Little Match Girl Passion", whose lyrics Lang also wrote, officially credited "H. C. Andersen, H. P. Paull (Andersen's translator into English), Picander (Bach's librettist), Saint Matthew and Saint Paul" as the sources of his text. His work won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for music.

[Below: the Little Match Girl (Victoria Munro, center, with arms folded) is surrounded by other children; edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Festival.]



Lang's music has been associated more than tangentially with a musical style that has received the name "minimalist music".

The operatic composers associated with this style include two composers who have produced very large works to which the term "minimalist" seems wildly dissonant. For example, specific operas of Philip Glass [See *The Remaking of San Francisco Opera, Part I: Glass' "Appomattox" – October 14, 200*] and John Adams [See *25 Years Old, "Nixon in China" Arrives at San Francisco Opera – June 8, 2012*] can be very big scale productions that tax an opera companies' resources.

Yet, if there is a work for the operatic stage for which the term "minimalist" might actually seem appropriate, it is this work, that uses, besides an ample children's chorus, four soloists, each of whom plays a percussion instrument that provides the orchestral accompaniment to the chorus and soloists.

[Below: the four soloists, from left to right, James Michael Porter, Christian Zaremba, Julia Mintzer and Lisa Williamson; edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Festival.]



The soloists were Pennsylvania mezzo-soprano Julia Mintzer, Arkansas tenor James Michael Porter, Maryland soprano Lisa Williamson, and New Jersey basso Christian Zaremba. The effect of their musical phrasing, often sung to repetitive individual syllables of a word, achieved the hypnotic effect that “minimalist” music is designed to evoke.

All four soloists were among this season’s Glimmerglass Festival Young Artists, as was the choreographer, Andrea Beasom.

The conductor was David Moody. The staging of the passion, directed by Francesca Zambello, was effective and always interesting. The costumes by Beth Goldenberg were especially striking for the children’s chorus. The simple sets by Marjorie Bradley Kellogg worked fine. The lighting was by Mark McCullough.

Recommendation

I strongly recommended that opera goers purchase a ticket for the Glimmerglass Festival “Stabat Mater” that precedes this work. I recommend that this very different work be seen as well, as part of an absorbing night of musical theater.