

The Big Picture

Based on Oscar Wilde's remarkable fable, Lowell Liebermann's composition comes to life in Philly.

by David Shengold

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Center City Opera Theater, an ambitious local enterprise presided over by conductor Andrew M. Kurtz, ended its eighth season with a genuine event: the commissioned world premiere of a chamber version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by one of America's more successful and interesting Neo-Romantic composers, Lowell Liebermann.

Unveiled in Monte Carlo in 1996, the opera, based on Oscar Wilde's remarkable fable, reached America three years later in Milwaukee. Never difficult to listen to — there are reminders of such composers as Korngold, Bartok, Barber and Glass (constant modulation over repeated chords), without the piece sounding derivative like the (musically) third-hand *Margaret Garner* — it sometimes sounded difficult to play, especially for the brass, though Kurtz led his committed forces with flair.

Special marks to flautists David DiGiacobbe and Lish Lindsey, harpist Melia Repko Schmunk and especially cellist James Cooper. The still-quite-lush orchestration at times overpowered the singers in the intimate Perelman Hall, rendering the text hard to comprehend in places: a shame, as the composer sets speech rhythms quite naturally.

Though Leland Kimball's staging was fluid and sensible, the lack of an enclosed-back set hindered the singers' projection. Bradley Helm was credited with "scenic concept," yielding six aptly Doric columns and a few scene-establishing props aided by a PowerPoint screen on which period photos, thematically apposite pre-Raphaelite paintings, some Turner seascapes and the progressively more grotesque versions of the famed portrait appeared. The final variants proved too cartoonish: Dorian's image evoked David Lee Roth in a gray fright wig.

Well-costumed by Amy Chmielewski, the cast performed strongly; Lieberman's idiom demands responsive upper registers. Jorge Garza, his lyric tenor always musical, gave a deft performance but presented the same problem as Hurd Hatfield in the 1945 film stolen by George Sanders' wry Henry and Angela Lansbury's heartbreaking Sibyl: He's a pleasant-looking, not-quite-young-enough guy in a part demanding a knockout. (I deplore "looks casting" in opera, but Dorian — like Billy Budd or Lulu — needs beauty that is an ethical entity unto itself.) Bass Matthew Curran, as Basil, the portrait's creator, sang very creditably but needed to animate his words more. Jody Sheinbaum's bright soprano and engaging presence won sympathy in Sibyl's difficult music. Best of all, Raymond Ayers (the aphoristic Lord Henry) showed a high-quality baritone with dynamic and coloristic flexibility plus a real gift for meaningful textual delivery. The leads were double-cast for the four-performance run, except the brave Garza. The others included Joseph Specter (Sibyl's vindictive brother), Jennifer Harris (a penetrating-voiced Whore), Olindo Marseglia (an amusing cameo as a toff) and Jeffrey Chapman (two servants). A satisfying evening.

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The Picture Of Dorian Gray

June 6, Center City Opera Theater, Perelman Hall