



Area audience can hear chamber orchestra version of 'Gray'

rbaxter@courierpostonline.com

Robert Baxter, a Courier-Post entertainment critic since 1979, writes each week about fine arts in the Delaware Valley.

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Lowell Liebermann's operatic adaptation of "The Picture of Dorian Gray" won critical raves when it premiered in Monte Carlo a decade ago. After the American premiere in Milwaukee three years later, Liebermann's opera had no further performances.

Andrew Kurtz discovered why as soon as he took a look at the full score. Liebermann's richly orchestrated opera calls for 94 musicians in the pit, far beyond the resources of Kurtz's Center City Opera Theater and most other American opera companies. But Kurtz was so impressed by the soaring melodies and the dramatic ensembles, he decided to commission Liebermann to prepare a chamber orchestra version of "The Picture of Dorian Gray."

That version reaches the stage of the Perelman Theater at Philadelphia's Kimmel Center Wednesday. Kurtz is sure the chamber version of Liebermann's opera will reach a wide audience.

"This opera has stunningly beautiful moments," says Kurtz, who will conduct the four Philadelphia performances. "It opens with an amazing trio and has a haunting love duet. This is Liebermann's first opera, but it is the work of a master of the form."

Born in New York City, Liebermann decided to compose a version of "The Picture of Dorian Gray" when he read Oscar Wilde's only novel at the age of 13.

"I was haunted by it," the composer later wrote, "by the richness of its characters and story, the poetry of its language, the fragrance of the decadence that clung to its pages."

"The Portrait of of Doran Gray" is a Gothic horror story about a handsome young Englishman who sells his soul to maintain his beauty. Plunging into debauchery, Gray remains forever young, but his portrait withers and decays as his cruel and sordid life continues.

"When I approached Lowell about making a reduction of his score, he was reluctant," explains Kurtz. "I asked him when was the last performance of his opera. I told him he would make a chamber orchestra version and I would perform it. I believe this opera has shelf life."

The two-act opera lasts two hours and 10 minutes and has 12 scenes. Kurtz says the score is derived from a sequence of 12 notes heard at the beginning. The 12 scenes of the opera occur in the keys of the pitches in the note row. Liebermann has composed a theme that represents both Dorian and his portrait. As the picture disintegrates, so does the musical theme.

Kurtz says he auditioned more than 600 singers for the seven roles. Tenor Jorge Garza sings the title role. The other leading roles are double cast.

Bass-baritones Jason Switzer and Raymond Ayers share the role of Lord Henry, the English nobleman who sets Dorian on his destructive path. Basses Matthew Curran and Richard Ziebarth perform the painter, Basil Hallward. Jody Sheinbaum and Megan Hart portray the actress who commits suicide after Dorian rejects her.

Center City Opera Theater began its life with a production of Donizetti's "Don Pasquale" in Pennsauken in 1999. The company -- then called the Opera Theater of Philadelphia -- moved to Haverford, Pa., before taking up residence four years ago in the 563-seat Perelman Theater.

"Our goal is making opera exciting and dynamic," explains Kurtz. "An intimate space like the Perelman Theater raises the level of excitement and intensity for audiences."

The company currently performs two mainstage productions at Perelman. During the 2006-07 season, the company also presented an Opera Encore series in the Kimmel Center's black box theater. Encore performances are semi-staged but have no sets or costumes and feature piano accompaniments. This season, Kurtz performed Mark Adamo's "Little Women" and Carlisle Floyd's "Of Mice and Men," both Philadelphia premieres.

"The audience for our Opera Encore series is mostly young people who have never attended an opera before," he says.

In the 2007-08 season, Center City Opera Theater expands to three mainstage productions: Puccini's "Madama Butterfly," Mozart's "Cosi Fan Tutte" and Donizetti's "L'Elisir d'Amore."

The Encore series -- renamed Opera Encounter -- focuses on what Kurtz calls "the revenge of the mezzo-soprano," four operas in which the mezzo plays a leading role: "Il Trovatore," "Werther," "Samson et Dalila" and "Carmen."

Reach Robert Baxter at (856) 486-2436 or rbaxter@courierpostonline.com