

Center City Opera premieres 'Picture of Dorian Gray'

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By ROBERT BAXTER
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Lowell Liebermann was captivated by "The Picture of Dorian Gray" in his youth. A decade ago, the American composer turned Oscar Wilde's gothic horror story into an opera that won critical acclaim but few performances.

On Wednesday, Center City Opera gave the world premiere of the chamber orchestra version of "The Picture of Dorian Gray" at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia. The new version uses less than half the musicians in Liebermann's richly orchestrated original, but the music's impact remains undiminished.

"The Picture of Dorian Gray" claims a significant place among American operas premiered in recent decades. Liebermann knows how to write melodies that take flight, but he also proves he can create vivid music drama that reflects the passions in Wilde's tale of corrupted innocence.

The glory of this compelling score is the cogent orchestral interludes that connect the 12 scenes. Those interludes vividly underscore the characters' turbulent emotions.

"The Picture of Dorian Gray" depicts the disintegration of a handsome young Englishman who strikes a Faustian bargain that allows his face to remain youthful. Dorian Gray's painted portrait reflects his degradation as he jilts a beautiful actress, murders the portrait painter and pursues a dissolute life.

Conductor Andrew M. Kurtz leads a propulsive performance that catches the melodic sweep and intense rhythms in the music. Stage director Leland Kimball keeps the action fluid on the stage of the Perelman Theater.

Bradley Helm's scenic concept plays off Dorian's portrait. The stage -- bare except for six receding columns and simple furnishings -- is dominated by a large frame containing projections of paintings and photographs that suggest the various scenes.

The cast performs capably if without much vocal distinction. Few of the singers voice the text with much clarity. English surtitles would help to clarify the blurred words.

Tenor Jorge Garza sings earnestly but lacks the physical and vocal allure for the title role. He does rise to the powerful final scene.

Jody Sheinbaum's soprano soars in the actress' arching vocal lines but sometimes turns edgy on top. Jennifer Harris sings commandingly as the whore who tempts Dorian in the dockside tavern.

Raymond Ayers impresses as the lord who provokes Dorian's search for beauty. Also effective are Matthew Curran as the painter and Joseph Specter as the actress' younger brother.

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'THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY'

*** of four

The cast:

Dorian Gray: Jorge Garza
Lord Henry: Raymond Ayers
Basil Hallward: Matthew Curran
Sybil Vane: Jody Sheinbaum
James Vane: Joseph Specter
Whore: Jennifer Harris
Lord Geoffrey: Olindo Marseglia

Music and libretto by Lowell Liebermann.

Conductor Andrew M.

Kurtz.

Stage director Leland Kimball.

Scenic concept Bradley Helm.

Costume designer Amy Chmielewski.

Lighting designer Krista Billings.

Presented by Center City Opera June 9, 10 and 12 on

Saturday, Sunday and Tuesday in the

Perelman Theater at the Kimmel

Center, Broad and Spruce streets,

Philadelphia. Tickets are \$39 to \$98.

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www.operatheater.org.

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