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## An opera finds its perfect place

By David Patrick Stearns  
Inquirer Music Critic

Now in its eighth season, Center City Opera has spent too much time competing with its audience's long-held standard-repertoire memories. Now it has decisively created original memories with Lowell Liebermann's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The work, which premiered in 1996 in Monte Carlo but has seldom been heard since, reemerged Wednesday in a new, smaller, composer-authored orchestration. And what a change. At its 1999 U.S. premiere by Milwaukee's Florentine Opera, *Dorian Gray* seemed like a safe practice piece (though we now know it led Liebermann to his great and powerful 2006 Nathanael West dramatization, *Miss Lonelyhearts*). But at the Kimmel's Perelman Theater, with less auditorium to fill, *Dorian Gray* stood confidently.

With its psychological plot about a man whose aging and corruption is deflected to a decaying portrait in his attic - no grand-opera backdrop needed - the piece was always a chamber opera that gains enormously from audience and characters in close proximity. The new orchestration makes it seem more eventful, while also failing to mask the weaker links.

The first act builds well, though with dramatic techniques that feel more borrowed than reinvented (the obligatory love duet, for one) and Philip Glass-style ostinatos that keep the pulse pumping but without much dramatic specificity.

By Act II, the more individualistic dramatist of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is emerging with smart counterpoint between the story's burgeoning moral decay and music that eerily grows expansive and rhapsodic. Much of it is so good you wondered how you missed it before - then you're reminded how remote and noncommittal the Milwaukee production was, as opposed to Center City Opera's atmospheric slide projections and Leland Kimball's unflinching stage direction, which had Dorian Gray spiking his arm with drugs at the start of Act II. If anything, restraint was needed in the final moment, when Dorian ages before our eyes, thanks to something resembling a Halloween mask.

The cast mostly employed model diction, giving the drama an immediacy and the characterizations an inner life all the more palpable without the distraction of surtitles. In the title role, Jorge Garza was cast more for his tenor voice than his looks, but that voice projected a strong illusion of male beauty. Matthew Curran (the portrait painter) and Raymond Ayers (the corrupting Lord Henry) similarly sang well and dramatically inhabited their roles.

The orchestra was audibly tired in Act II, but not founder/conductor Andrew Kurtz, who seized upon the many fascinating instrumental pairings - like the blending effects of oboe, English horn and flute - sometimes too loudly but always with dramatic meaning.

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### *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Music and libretto by Lowell Liebermann. Presented by Center City Opera. Conductor, Andrew M. Kurtz. Directed by Leland Kimball. Scenic concept by Bradley Helm.

**Cast:** Raymond Ayers (Lord Henry), Matthew Curran (Basil Hallward), Jorge Garza (Dorian Gray), Jody Sheinbaum (Sibyl Vane), Joseph Specter (James Vane).

**Playing at** the Kimmel Center's Perelman Theater tomorrow, Sunday and Tuesday. Tickets: \$39 to \$98. Information: 215-893-1999 or

[www.kimmelcenter.org](http://www.kimmelcenter.org).

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