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AUGUST 31, 2020

REVIEW: Berkshire Opera Festival 2020

Great Barrington, MA

www.berkshireoperafestival.org

through September 4, 2020

by Michael J. Moran

Forced by Covid-19 to cancel the fully staged production of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" with which they had planned to celebrate their fifth anniversary this year, the Berkshire Opera Festival pivoted, like Tanglewood, to a virtual alternative. Instead of three live performances in Pittsfield's Colonial Theatre, they are presenting an hour-long concert video stream, with selections recorded mask less but distanced in various locations, by the opera's principal cast members, which will stay available on their web site through September 4 at 8:30 pm.

Hosted by BOF co-founders, Artistic Director Brian Garman and Director of Productions

Jonathon Loy, the program opens with a stunningly dramatic account by soprano Joanna Latini



of Donna Elvira's aria of rage, "Mi tradi," after her betrayal by the title scoundrel in Mozart's "Don Giovanni." She is brilliantly accompanied by BOF staff pianist Christopher Koelzer on the acoustically friendly stage of St. James Place, the company's home in Great Barrington. Multiple camera angles filmed by Pittsfield Community Television capture Latini's total immersion in the role through gestures and facial expressions.

Bass-baritone Andre Courville next accompanies himself on piano at his Louisiana home in a ravishing rendition of Count Rodolfo's aria of regret, "Vi ravviso, o luoghi ameni," from Bellini's "La Somnambula." Tenor Joshua Blue then sings a fervent "Che gelida manina," as Rodolfo meets Mimi, in Puccini's "La Boheme," at St. James Place with Koelzer. He's followed by soprano Laura Wilde at her Chicago home, with pianist Pedro Yanez, in a powerful "Du bist der Lenz," Sieglinde's love song to Siegfried, from Wagner's "Die Walkure."



Berkshires resident and bass-baritone John Cheek, with Koelzer at St. James Place, is a visual and vocal hoot in "O wie will ich triumphieren," Osmin's aria of comic vengeance, from Mozart's "The Abduction from the Seraglio." Even at age 72, Cheek's sepulchral voice still sounds agelessly agile. Next, from her home in Puerto Rico with pianist Ernesto Busigo, soprano Natalia Santaliz sings a radiant "De Espana vengo," a love song to Spain, from Pablo Luna's zarzuela "El Nino Judio."

Baritone Brian James Myer, at his Philadelphia home with pianist Michael Sherman, is lush and elegant in Pierrot's wistful aria, "Mein Sehnen, mein Wahren," from Korngold's "Die Tote Stadt." Bass Erik Anstine, from his home in New York City with pianist Carol Wong, is robust and virile as Emile in "Some Enchanted Evening," from Rodgers and Hammerstein's "South Pacific." The concert ends quite literally on a rapturous high note as Latini and Blue reunite with Koelzer at St. James Place in Puccini's ardent love duet "O soave fanciulla" from "La Boheme."

New York's Metropolitan Opera may have set the template for virtual benefit concerts like this one with its April 25 At-Home Gala. In that context this BOF event measures up admirably, boasting the same high professional standards of performance and production, with the same variable acoustics from some remote sites. Area opera fans should check out this impressive musical tribute to an invaluable local resource while they can.

LABELS: BERKSHIRE OPERA FESTIVAL, MUSIC, OPERA, REVIEWS, THE BERKSHIRES

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