

Opera con Brio

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Boston Lyric Opera's *Bluebeard's Castle*

with *Four Songs* by Alma Mahler

A Journey Worth the Trip

Through many years of giving pre-opera lectures for Boston Lyric Opera, I never had to be concerned with performance venues. For better or worse, it was always the Schubert Theater, a relatively audience-unfriendly and acoustically challenging theater. In recent years, however, the enterprising BLO has taken on the risky challenge of adapting unusual venues for the needs of an admirably varied repertory, often with great success. One of the most successful was the 2019 production of *The Handmaid's Tale* in a basketball gym at Harvard University. Directed by Anne Bogart, this shocking tale based on Margaret Atwood's best-selling novel (set in the very building now housing the gym) proved to be a compelling,

even spine-tingling night at the opera. No less so was the current production of Bartók's 20th century expressionist thriller *Bluebeard's Castle*, also directed by Ms. Bogart, performed as a double bill with *Four Songs (Vier Lieder)* by Alma Mahler. In this case the performance space was even more evocative, the massive hall of Flynn Cruiseport Boston (formerly known as Black Falcon Cruise Terminal).

One might have thought the large empty space a handicap. Not so, as imaginatively put to use by Ms. Bogart and Set Designer Sara Brown, who, along with a skilled production crew, transformed the space, first built in 1919 as a large Army storage shed, into a one-of-a

kind immersive experience. This began with the audience ascending an escalator, often used by travelers on altogether different voyages, with the first stop a bright Viennese salon with a black grand piano at its center. Seated there, an elegant pianist, Yukiko Oba, played a stream of melodious songs, all by female composers. Further stressing the feminine element, six women, clad in exquisite early 20th-century gowns (by Costume Designer Trevor Bowen) and wearing carnival face masks, strolled languidly here and there as the audience mingled and imbibed before the performance began.



Mezzo-soprano Naomi Louisa O'Connell with pianist Yukiko Oba opens *Bluebeard's Castle* with one of Alma Mahler's *Four Songs*
Photo: Liza Voll

As it turns out all this was but a prelude to the grim second and last stop: the imposing, macho world of *Bluebeard's Castle*, a dark, rectangular hall still defined by the dark wooden ceiling and metal fixtures of its former lives. At the center, on an elevated platform a large bed rested, with a large black boulder hovering ominously above. The expectant audience filtered into bleachers on three sides, while the 29 players of the reduced chamber orchestra occupied the fourth side. At the matinee I attended (the final performance on March 26), clerestory windows gave extra illumination, over a narrow band of colored florescent lights framing the dark set from above. As it also turns out, the six masked ladies had followed us into the hall to parade as if in a trance on a highlighted runway around the elevated stage. Soon we realized these were *Bluebeard's* previous wives (expanded in the production from three to six).

Another piano, a white baby grand, occupied a corner in the dark space near the entrance. And soon our Judith for the performance, radiant mezzo-soprano Naomi Louise O'Connell, joined the same pianist from earlier in the salon to sing the first three of the *Four Songs* by Alma Mahler. For me, the use of these songs was as intriguing a part of the production as was the venue itself. *Bluebeard's Castle*, just an hour long, is usually performed as a double bill. In this case, the "companion piece," Alma Mahler's *Four Songs*, written early in her life about the same time as Bartók's opera, became more than merely a part of a double bill; they became an integral frame that helped to define the performance itself and indeed the character of Judith. As Ms. Bogart states in the program notes, Alma Mahler subjugated herself to many men, including Gustav Mahler, "... and it seemed to me that there's something in that between Alma Mahler and the Judith character."

The *Four Songs*, lyrical and often harmonically adventurous, all sung in German, were rearranged to better dovetail with the opera as envisioned by the production team. The third, “Ansturm” (“Storm”), came first, with its particularly apt opening text, which Ms. O’Connell sang with expressive vigor and clarity about desires that must break forth into the light. As she comments in her program notes, having spent some time researching Alma Mahler and her songs, “The passion of a young composer shines through the songs – eager, impulsive – an easy link to Judith’s character.” The second song, “Waldseligkeit” (“Woodland Bliss”) evoked an air of gentle yearning with its lovely imagery of nature, while the now-orchestrated third song (the fourth in the original cycle), “Erntelied” (“Harvest Song”) led with heightened sensuality to the opera itself. Continuing its play on themes of light and dark, like the production itself, the song was a paean to the light of day and to the beauty of nature after the sorrows of the night.

Finishing this song, Ms. O’Connell then morphed briefly into the “Bard” of Bartók’s spoken prologue, welcoming us in English to Bluebeard’s Castle. And in the next breath we were there, as Bluebeard sang to Judith in the opening lines, “Here ends our journey./ This our goal and dwelling./ This is Bluebeard’s Castle./ Yes, the house you left was brighter./ Judith, are you still with me?” And her answer is both immediate and foreboding: “Lead me, loved one, I will follow.”

The opening sequence became indeed an extraordinary segue into this allegorical opera of uncertain meaning. And we join in the journey too as Judith, the last of Bluebeard’s wives, insists he open the seven locked doors of his castle – in this more sensuous production the varied fabrics covering the bed – to reveal the secrets of his life. In the program book, Ms. O’Connell also speculates on what was perhaps the strongest link between the two – “the nature of the strength of a muse, like the nature of a new love – an obsessive need to know it all.” For Judith, of course, this is her compulsion to know more about Bluebeard, to learn what is behind each door in his castle, in the end with devastating consequences.

Having just returned from New York and a performance of the Met’s new, cosmic production of *Lohengrin*, I could not help be reminded of the parallel as Elsa becomes obsessed with finding the answer to the forbidden question, the name and origin of



Naomi Louisa O’Connell as Judith; Ryan McKinny as Bluebeard

Photo: Liza Voll

the mysterious knight Lohengrin – to devastating effect as well, except for the redemptive silver lining in this ultra-romantic opera, the restoration of Elsa’s rightful ancestors at the end. But in the original Bartók opera, written some sixty years after *Lohengrin*, there is no such Romantic gloss. Judith will witness his wealth, his territory, his dominance and their cost in blood. And in Bartók’s original libretto, because she must ask questions instead of simply love, she like her predecessors is doomed to the shadows behind the seventh door while Bluebeard remains alone on stage, enveloped in “Endless darkness” (his last words).

But not in this production, thanks to the postlude of one last song by Alma Mahler (first in the original cycle): “Licht in der Nacht” (“Light in the Night”). Judith, whom Bluebeard has just reminded that he found her at night-fall, sings the song as she cradles the somnolent Bluebeard amidst the crumpled last fabric removed from the bed. (As Bartók’s libretto reminds us, Bluebeard found the first three wives at morning, midday, and evening respectively.) The circle of this production’s other six wives watch as Ms. O’Connell finishes the final lines, and thus the production, in a hushed tone radiating peace and consolation. Roughly translated, she sings of a distant light in the night that has gone out and notes that the night has become heavy; she concludes, “Sleep, heart, you will hear no voice again.”

The deviation from Bartók’s intent irked some, but to me it seemed a perfect close to this more personal, intimate, and fluid



Ryan McKinny as Bluebeard; Naomi Louisa O’Connell as Judith, removing one of the covers
Photo: Liza Voll

production. Often the dark and static opera with just two characters, Bluebeard and Judith, gets performed in concert as an oratorio. Yet utilizing the unique space, Anne Bogart kept the action moving right from the start when, during the first songs, the six silent former wives paraded about the stage like models on a runway, trophies of Bluebeard’s macho reign. During the opera itself, with the large bed center stage, they retreated to the corners reacting rather like a silent Greek chorus, often with graphic gestures in response to the drama center stage – no literal doors, but layers of billowing fabric on the bed, removed one by one to symbolize the secrets behind each door.

To be sure, this was the most striking, and I think successful, innovation of the production, - its symbolism of having each new “door” being the removal of another layer of covers from the bed, while at the same time having Bluebeard lose another layer of clothing until finally he is shirtless. He thus becomes exposed as both mortal and vulnerable.



Ryan McKinny as Bluebeard; Naomi Louisa O'Connell as Judith
Photo: Liza Voll

Lighting effects, by Lighting Designer Brian H. Scott, were also stunning in their variety and aptness, at times blood red and at one point especially powerful with the blue lighting for the Lake of Tears as the wives spread a large gray fabric to flood the whole stage around the bed. And the interactions of the beleaguered protagonists around the bed, its covers, and their removal also made for an infinitely more intimate production than one normally gets. Indeed, the production necessitated an “Intimacy Director,” Angie Jepson, to help orchestrate the overt sensuality that permeated the performance. At the same time, BLO Music Director David Angus artfully shaped the colorful orchestral palette to mirror both the protagonists’ intimate interactions and the varied descriptive passages at each unveiling of a cover.

Of course none of this would have been possible without the extraordinary artists who took the lead in this personal, yet powerful music drama. Bass baritone Ryan McKinny, with his hulking frame and rich, dark voice

seemed not only the perfect lead for an opera that Ms. Bogart called perhaps “the most male-centered opera ever written.” Yet he also conveyed a uniquely sympathetic Bluebeard as well, a husband with whom Judith was believably very much in love and whom she wants to help. And mezzo-soprano Naomi Louisa O’Connell was the perfect complement, bringing all her experience in contemporary opera to bear as a passionate Judith, determined in her quest for truth. With a voice of warmth and clarity, she was an impassioned interpreter of Alma Mahler’s songs and also able as Judith to skillfully penetrate Bartók’s colorful and varied textures.

Most important, the two protagonists were a convincing and sympathetic pair, perfect for the concept of this production with its humanizing, even cathartic postlude, which alters Bartók’s somber expressionistic close. Indeed this final song could just as well have been Bach’s famous 18th century cantata “Ich habe genug” (“I have enough”), BWV 82, for soprano and flute, with its poignant central aria, “Fall asleep, you weary eyes.../ World, I will not remain here any longer.” This production of *Bluebeard’s Castle* became more than BLO’s advertising of it as an “immersive psychological thriller.” While it was certainly that, it also reminds us that opera can resonate as timely and thought-provoking beyond its story and music. The journey, be it in the opera house or in a transformed Cruiseport, can be life-enhancing. Let’s hope Boston Lyric Opera continues on this adventurous track; the risks are often worth the benefits.