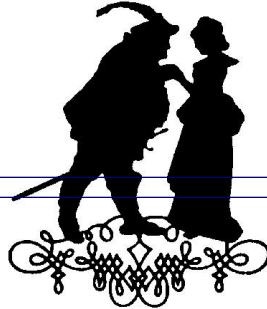


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Santa Fe Opera, 2021: A Miss and a Hit

The Lord of Cries and Eugene Onegin

After a hiatus of almost two years, the venerable Santa Fe Opera returned this summer with a carefully balanced season – its 64th - that happily represented four centuries of opera. A recent *Opera con Brio* article reviewed two of these works led by the Opera's Artistic Director Harry Bicket: Mozart's evergreen *The Marriage of Figaro* and Britten's masterful adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Reviewed below are the other two offerings of this varied season: the enterprising lurch into our times, John Corigliano's *The Lord of Cries*, an ambitious amalgamation of two literary sources, and Tchaikovsky's poignant cap to the Romantic century, *Eugene Onegin*. Even with a myriad of last minute cast changes and Covid-necessitated adjustments, the season continued its impressive tradition of the new and the old.

The Lord of Cries

Colorful music for a flawed opera

While Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, as librettist and singer, had adapted Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an opera in a relatively quick burst of inspiration, another enterprising team, composer John Corigliano and his spouse, Mark Adamo, struggled for about ten years to forge an amalgamation of two literary sources, Euripides' Greek tragedy *The Bacchae* and Bram Stoker's Gothic novel *Dracula*, into a single cohesive work. The resulting opera, *The lord of Cries*, received its much-anticipated premiere at Santa Fe Opera this summer. It proved an interesting but flawed work, a sometimes jumbled mishmash falling short of their stated intent to make the theme of these two sources, the dangers inherent in trying

to repress our darkest desires, more accessible to a modern audience. Part of the problem may have been the years spent in creation; a more serious problem was perhaps simply trying to articulate this theme with a combination of these two diverse works, rather than with just one. *The Bacchae* alone would have done fine. As Adamo himself states in the program book, “Classics do not die.”

The point is worth stressing. Hans Werner Henze wrote a version titled *The Bassarids* based solely on Euripides’ original that premiered at Salzburg 1966 and received its American premiere at Santa Fe in 1968. I was fortunate to catch up with it in Salzburg just three years ago (in 2018). The universally acclaimed production drove home, in just one massive act (with intermezzo) the torturous conflict between human rationality and emotional control, between the King of Thebes, Pentheus, and the unbridled human passion represented by the god Dionysus. This was a shattering night in the theatre, as are the two one act operatic versions of antiquity, Strauss’s riveting *Elektra* and Stravinsky’s even more taut opera/oratorio *Oedipus Rex*. But superimposing a rambling Gothic horror story on Euripides’ revenge tragedy just didn’t work. One good act of Euripides would do, sans endless, often-confusing plot details from *Dracula* - especially in the first act.

That said, there was much to admire in Corigliano’s music, the terrific cast, and the production itself. Adam Rigg’s single unit set was the basis for varied and apt scenic effects via projections by Adam Larsen and selective lighting by Pablo Santiago. Although Corigliano has just one lengthy opera to his credit, *The Ghosts of Versailles*, he had proved an accomplished composer in other genres; thus this opera radiated with a wide range of color and wonderful expressive variety – including vivid percussive effects - all brought out by the attentive conducting of Johannes Debus.



Anthony Roth Costanzo, Dionysus Photo: Curtis Brown

And he writes with a sure hand for the voice as well. Vocal highlights abounded, beginning with the commanding countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo as Dionysus, fresh from the title role of *Akhmaten* in the Met’s last season. One only wishes to hear and see more of this titular character; after all, *Elektra*, the power source of that opera, never departs the stage. On the other hand, it was a good idea to give Costanzo a Prologue to start the opera, which he does with heroic timbre, as elaborately attired as he was in the Met’s *Akhmaten*. He thus can orient the audience to just how he got from a god wrecking havoc on Thebes to where he’s now going: Victorian London of 1897 as the “Lord of Cries” to wreck havoc on Carfaz Abbey and its asylum.

Thus prepared were we for two other standout performances of the evening, each with impressive extended scenes: one, tenor David Portillo as Jonathan Harker, whose mind has been shattered by the Lord of Cries and his accomplices (three malevolent sisters), and the other soprano Kathryn Henry, apprentice artist, in the formidable role of his wife, Lucy, a synthesis of two characters in *Dracula*, Mina Harker and Lucy Westenra. In fact we soon discover it is she who really dominates the opera, trying to save her husband before becoming the final

victim herself of the Lord of Cries. Ms. Henry took over the role from well-known soprano Susanna Phillips, who departed the production “for personal reasons” at the outset of dress rehearsals. Impressively, Ms. Henry took over the role with a compelling performance, especially with the role’s demands in the lower register. In the second act as she become desperate to save her husband, her sustained Brittenesque arioso had all the hallmarks of *Peter Grimes* in its poignant leaps and demands high and low. She met them well with her warm, even radiant tone.



Kathryn Henry, Lucy Harker, David Portillo, Jonathan Harker
Photo: Curtis Brown

Another former apprentice deserving of top honors was baritone Jarrett Ott as Jon Seward, vivid vocally, and especially apt dramatically as he struggles throughout as both head of Carfax Asylum and trusted friend and would-be lover of Lucy Harker. One of Corigliano’s most beautiful moments was Mr. Ott’s mellifluous duet with Lucy. In contrast Corigliano’s music for the three macabre sisters, Dionysus’ acolytes – apprentices Leah Bryzki, Rachel Blaustein and Megan Moore – was aptly eerie and disturbingly dissonant. Meanwhile,



Jarrett Ott, Jon Seward Photo: Curtis Brown

bass Kevin Burdette was given the task of narrating material that might have been better drawn through drama and music, as with the chaos closing the first act bacchanal. In the end, good music, good voices, and an inventive production – even with a periodic narrator picking up the pieces - couldn’t save a flawed work.



Leah Bryzki, Rachel Blaustein, and Megan Moore, Acolytes of Dionysus
Photo: Curtis Brown

Eugene Onegin

An intimate, inventive homage to Pushkin

The hit of the season for many was Tchaikovsky's poignant lyrical drama *Eugene Onegin*. In the hands of Russian Director Alessandro Talevi, the opera came through as the intimate set of "lyrical scenes" Tchaikovsky intended, much as I had first encountered it in 1972 at Moscow Conservatory's Maliy Theatre (renamed Stanislavski Theatre) - where it premiered in a student production about a century before that. Just two years later came the opera's professional premiere at the nearby Bolshoi Theatre, thus beginning the trend for more expansive productions that filled out the festive scenes, dances, and choruses. Yet the intimate nature of the piece has always stayed with me. Mr. Talevi captured this aspect of the familiar work well, with this production in a medium-sized house that stripped away the clutter to keep focus on the protagonists.

At the same time, with an opera always difficult to stage successfully, he kept the strong emotions of these protagonists front and center via daring, albeit scaled-down festive parts. In doing so the production paid an imaginative tribute to perhaps the most beloved work of Russian fiction, Pushkin's acerbic novel in verse of the same name. Mr. Talevi's ability to work in this way was no surprise to me, having a decade ago reviewed his stunning production of Handel's *Amadigi* in the miniscule theatre at Central City Opera. There his directorial concept, merely an exquisite Renaissance *studiolo*, served as both a restrictive and liberating background for the emotional and psychological fluctuations of the opera's four characters.

The Santa Fe production worked pretty much the same way, isolating the two emotionally torn principals, Tatyana and Onegin, with detached irony. Two fine artists had taken over these roles as last



Sara Jakubiak, Tatyana Photo: Curtis Brown

minute replacements due to visa complications, the youthful and expressive dramatic soprano Sara Jakubiak and commanding baritone Lucas Meachem, a former apprentice artist. Ms. Jakubiak caught wonderfully the essence of the initially simple, 17-year-old bookworm, Tatyana. "...As timid as the *sylvan* doe," says Pushkin; "In her own family / she seemed a strangeling." The dreamy country girl then falls instantly falls in love with Onegin, 24, an already jaded aristocrat from the big city, perfectly embodied by Mr. Meachem with his reserved demeanor and resonant baritone.

Her famous letter scene, written in a nocturnal burst of passion to Onegin becomes the lynchpin to the opera. But her *studiolo*, metaphorically speaking, is more than simply a place of repose, with or without books; it is her imaginative and romantic state of mind, amidst the designs of scenic and



Sara Jakubiak, Tatyana; Lucas Meachem, Onegin
Photo: Curtis Brown

costume designer Gary McCann. His *Golden Cockerel* was just as much a hit four years ago. Here his sets often expanded from indoors to outdoors as, for example, in the opening scene of the opera from Tatyana's home, the Larin estate, past a cluster of aspen trees to a golden field beyond. On the night I attended, one of those glorious Santa Fe sunsets illuminated the expanse of fields extending beyond the set, adding luster to Rick Fisher's always-effective lighting.

Yet something was amiss, pointedly so. Just as Pushkin's narrator is an intrusive presence, so too, when dance music was present, Athol Farmer's choreography for the small, oddly-costumed group of Wise Fool New Mexico and dancers seemed incongruous, even macabre. Such was the case with the Reapers' music, a Tchaikovsky insertion of a



Olga, Avery Amereau; Larina, Katharine Goeldner; Filipyevna, Deborah Nansteel; Dancers and Wise Fool New Mexico
Photo: Curtis Brown

chorus and peasant dances in the opening scene. But at just the right moment, Director Talevi removes this distraction and lets the singers take the spotlight for the ensuing quartet. Onegin and Lensky, and the two Larin sisters, Tatyana and Olga, the lovely contralto Avery Amereau, are separated in respective pairs as they sing carefully sculpted phrases from Pushkin. The men casually appraise the girls, as the love-struck Tatyana recognizes in Onegin the "somebody for whom her soul had been waiting." The sensitive conducting of Nicholas Carter further illuminated these poignant moments of lyricism.



Sara Jakubiak, Tatyana; Dancers and Wise Fool New Mexico
Photo: Curtis Brown

In the ensuing letter scene, dancers still lingered in the background, and they seemed to catch the detached, ironic tone explicit in Pushkin's intrusive narrator, who disparages Tatyana's passionate confession of love with the devastating preamble: "Who taught her all that touching tosh, / mad conversation of the heart / both fascinating and injurious?" Throughout the opera these macabre, even pointedly awkward dancers thus become an ironic statement in contrast to the inner reality of Tatyana's mental state. The chorus contributed to this "distancing" effect throughout the opera also, singing from bleachers to the left of the audience for social-distancing reasons.

The same pattern continues for the remaining two acts. In Act II the country waltz, staged as an odd homey dancing lesson for Tatyana and Olga, halts dramatically for the largest ensemble of the opera, the quintet of principals with chorus (now including mezzo Katherine Goeldner as Larina, the girls' mother) as they react in horror to the burst of antagonism between Onegin and Lensky. For the Act III polonaise, often a sweeping grand tableau for dancers and chorus, just a few surreal dancers serve as the backdrop to Onegin's return from abroad, still miserable, to encounter a married and now sophisticated Tatyana.

And time stops for bass James Creswell's aria extolling the many virtues of his happy marriage to Tatyana, as time had stopped in the previous act for Lensky's equally poignant lyrical farewell to Olga, sung most expressively by tenor Dovlet Nurgeldiyev in the desolate countryside.



Dovlet Nurgeldiyev, Lensky

Photo: Curtis Brown

When present, these peculiarly choreographed moments provide a kind of ironic contrast to the inner world of the protagonists. A literary critic once called Pushkin's intrusive narrator's voice "a kind of spiritual air-conditioner." In the final scene of this production, the "air-conditioner," the oddly choreographed moments, is shut off completely.

Lucas Meachem, Onegin; James Creswell, Prince Gremin;
Sara Jakubiak, Tatyana; Dancers and Wise Fool New Mexico
Photo: Curtis Brown

Nothing intrudes during the romantic melodrama between Tatyana and Onegin, which unfolds, with raw emotional and dramatic force. At the end, Tatyana, having rejected Onegin despite her love for him, merely exits; for his part, Onegin, now as distraught as Tatyana once was, with nowhere to hide, just disappears into a black hole, literally. Their dramatic instincts, as well as vocal prowess was all that was needed in this crowd-free final moment. The end was devastating.

Sara Jakubiak, Tatyana; Lucas Meachem, Onegin
Photo Curtis Brown