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OPERA REVIEW

Searching the Subconscious

Recent performances explore the inner psyche, connect pleasure with pain, and reveal the dark past of a religious figure.



Bora Yoon in *Sunken Cathedral* PHOTO: CORY WEAVER

By **HEIDI WALESON** | Jan. 20, 2015 4:43 p.m. ET

New York

'*Sunken Cathedral*,' the last of the Prototype Festival's four premieres this month, underscored how invaluable this three-year-old, carefully curated enterprise is. The festival plays with contemporary opera, music and theater, bringing together classical, popular and experimental forms. The offerings are varied, everything is immaculately produced in well-chosen spaces, and even the unstaged presentations of works in progress, like this year's "*Winter's Child*," provide a stimulating experience of the new.

"*Sunken Cathedral*," by vocalist and composer Bora Yoon, directed by Glynis Rigsby and presented at the La MaMa First Floor Theater last week, invited the audience to join Ms. Yoon on an hour-long plunge into her subconscious. Cocooned by Tom Lee's homey yet mysterious set—a room with a kitchen island, a grandfather clock and transparent walls—Ms. Yoon, sweet-voiced and graceful in a purple dress, coaxed music from ordinary objects like bowls, a metronome and a cellphone. Even actions like peeling a carrot, or setting a crystal rotating on a phonograph turntable, had a sonic as well as a visual component. She also spoke, hummed and sang, complemented by an electronic score.

Adam Larsen's dreamy projections—a cathedral, the shadow of a giant squid, a night sky—kept this already strange environment subtly off-kilter. So did such sudden interruptions as a telephone message from a woman who might have been Ms. Yoon's mother; the appearance of Vong Pak, a dancer and drummer in traditional Korean dress; and the sounds of a violent storm. Yet the piece had a consistently hypnotic, alluring character, welcoming the spectators along the arc of a very personal journey.

"Pergolesi Power Games," presented by Morningside Opera and Siren Baroque on Friday, was a clever idea that didn't pan out. Pergolesi's 1736 "*Stabat Mater*" depicts Mary's anguish as she watches the suffering of Jesus on the cross in incongruously sensual melody and jaunty

accompaniment; is it perhaps about deriving pleasure from pain? So the choreographed staging by Laura Careless reflected the character of the music rather than the text. Two female soloists, soprano Brett Umlauf and alto Amber Youell, enacted a teasing courtship ritual. It was a game—they dressed up in 18th-century clothes and wigs (the most obvious pain was the alto lacing the soprano into a very tight corset) and one pretended to be dead so that the other could mourn her. For the final sprightly “Amen” duet, they piled the costume pieces on the floor, looking around guiltily like naughty children caught in inappropriate play. The Latin text could have been anything, and the paradox didn’t come across.

Continuing with the pleasure/pain theme, in Pergolesi’s “La Serva Padrona” (1733), director Annie Holt turned the crafty servant Serpina (Brittany Palmer) into a dominatrix complete with corset, boots and leather pants who tricked her client Uberto (Michael Shaw) into marrying her. But as in the “Stabat Mater,” the production didn’t go far enough. The whip and the ball gag were props, again suggesting naughtiness rather than real transgression, and the tiny Alchemical Theatre, a gallery space on 14th Street where the audience is practically on top of the singers, made it difficult to create any illusion. The singers for both pieces were a mixed lot (the standout was Ms. Palmer) and the four-member instrumental ensemble led by harpsichordist Kelly Savage was supportive if not always pitch perfect.

Brooklyn, N.Y.

“The Enchanted Wanderer” by Rodion Shchedrin, presented by the Mariinsky Opera at the Brooklyn Academy of Music last week, is not a ringing endorsement for contemporary Russian composition. Mr. Shchedrin wrote the piece for Lorin Maazel and the New York Philharmonic, who gave its premiere in 2002. The composer adapted his own libretto from an 1873 novel by Nikolai Leskov. It is a confusing, episodic affair set to a lugubrious score that combines characteristic Russian elements, like Orthodox chanting and church bells, with a little contemporary dissonance thrown in.

Ivan, a monk, recounts his violent, dissolute youth—a murder, his captivity by the Tatars, his drunkenness and his relationship with the gypsy Grusha. Grusha is appropriated by Ivan’s then-employer, the Prince, and when the Prince abandons her to marry someone else, she begs Ivan to kill her, which he does.

All the action is in the orchestra, ably conducted by Valery Gergiev. There are plaintive woodwinds; a brassy, muscular Tatar dance; an outburst of lurching tubas for Ivan’s night of drunkenness. But one wearied of the interminable choral prayers. Bass Oleg Sychoy tried to inject some spontaneity into Ivan’s long stretches of declamation; Kristina Kapustinskaya, a bright, precise mezzo, had to do a lot of mournful, chromatic crooning. Most interesting was the chameleonlike tenor Andrei Popov, who played all of the other characters, including, most amusingly, the Magnetizer who tempts Ivan into drink and bad behavior.

The piece was conceived as a concert work, and the ritualistic staging by Alexei Stepanyuk was a vain attempt at making it dramatic. Alexander Orlov’s set, a field of tall, dry stalks, crunched when stepped on; a rope hanging from the ceiling became a swing and a harness, but mostly a noose. Dmitry Korneyev did the clunky choreography for the 10 dancers who became Tatars, gypsies and monks to fill out the scenes; the chorus, in monkish robes and black head coverings, looked on impassively from a window above the stage.

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.

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