

Charlottesville

VICTORY HALL OPERA was established seven years ago by two experienced singers, Miriam Gordon-Stewart and Brenda Patterson, who wanted to ‘present a new model for what an opera company can be: not an institution, but a troupe’. They’ve staged 27 operas, including five brand new works, and their latest commission is *Fat Pig* by the American composer Matt Boehler, with a libretto by Gordon-Stewart (who also directed) based on a play by Neil LaBute, the playwright and screenwriter.

Fat Pig (January 27) is scored for a small ensemble of violin, viola, cello, two clarinets, two contrabass clarinets and percussion. Boehler’s music is wistful and tonal. He writes well for the voice, especially the female voice—one passage in particular stood out, when Tracy Cox as Helen sang a captivating aria in the final scene with the last bars sung unaccompanied above the stave, her musical line then picked up seamlessly by the cello.

The story is placed in 1990s Tampa, with four characters: Helen, a plus-size woman; the romantically inclined Tom (Troy Cook); his office colleague Jeannie (Sarah Wolfson); and the brash Carter (William Ferguson). The sets, abstract and sparse, were designed by Yimeng Teng, costumes by Caroline Cook and lighting by Joshua Reid.

The production worked well. It had a very present-day feeling and the characters were believable because they were sharply drawn. Cox is a versatile actress who conveyed pathos and wit with skill, singing with a clear voice and secure top notes, as well as vocal characterization that coloured her scenes with anguish. Cook, a thoughtful actor, managed to convey male weakness, singing with elegance, stylish phrasing and soft expressivity. Wolfson came across as appropriately peevish and entitled, singing generously, with firm tone and controlled technique. Ferguson brought his big, disciplined voice to convey his churlish, crass character, with conviction and robust tone.

Kathleen Kelly conducted expansively and with great spirit. She managed the score’s intricate rhythmic schemes cautiously and was very attentive to the singers’ needs. Her choice of tempos was on the slow side, almost languid, but never lethargic. She drew impressive playing from the musicians.

HÉCTOR LUISI

Tracy Cox and Troy Cook in the premiere of 'Fat Pig' in Charlottesville

