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£6.95 June 2023

# Opera

'Bastarda' in Brussels

Brenden Gunnell—exploring Grimes

For the record: Josephine Barstow

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## UNITED STATES

### Charlottesville

VICTORY HALL OPERA gave the premiere performances of *Orpheus & Erica* (seen on March 21), a new work based on Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, which they presented as 'a deaf opera'.

The score was chiefly Gluck's, with cuts, plus an aria from Purcell's *Fairy Queen*, arranged for a chamber ensemble of two violins, viola, cello, bass and oboe. Calzabigi's libretto was skilfully revised by Miriam Gordon-Stewart, with poetry by Gregory Orr. Her revision updates the Orpheus myth to the present day and introduces a young couple, Erica and Orson, both of whom are deaf.

Erica battles cancer and infertility, loyally supported by Orson. She is treated by Dr Phoenix, a sympathetic physician, who is also deaf. Gluck's opera serves to combine the mythological characters' story with the modern characters' narrative. Erica, Orson and Dr Phoenix performed in American Sign Language (ASL).

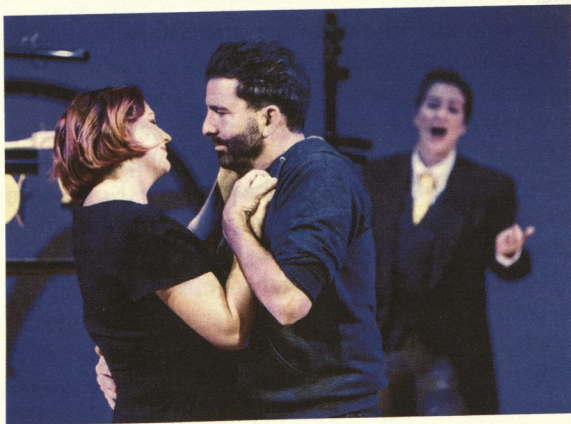
Alek Lev and Gordon-Stewart were the stage directors, with sets by Yimeng Teng and costumes by Tracy Cox. The opera was performed in the University of Virginia's CABELL HALL AUDITORIUM, which has no theatrical facilities or orchestra pit, but the production overcame the venue's limitations. The sets consisted of three moveable tubular rings of different diameters, made of black PVC. Complementing the rings were three portable black PVC pipes, which looked like stylized coat racks. They each became trees, IV poles with attached coils of medical plastic tubing or, when combined with one or more rings, an MRI machine.

Orpheus wore morning dress with a yellow tie. In his hair he sported a small golden disc representing the sun, which he removed for Act 2. Eurydice wore a pale blue ballgown and black gloves with a small silver half-moon in her hair, also removed. Erica was in a black dress and heavy grey biker boots, Orson in jeans and a dark grey sweatshirt, Dr Phoenix a white lab coat and Amore white medical scrubs.

The polished production was very effective, with good balance between never crude comedy and never mawkish tragedy. The scenes of Erica undergoing chemotherapy

were especially hard-hitting, reflecting the talent of Amber Zion who portrayed her. Orson's love for Erica and his anguish when confronted with her illnesses were admirably portrayed by John Maucere. Both are gifted deaf actors and those not fluent in ASL could easily understand what they were expressing. Warren 'Wawa' Snipe, a deaf hip-hop artist, was Dr Phoenix. He had a commanding stage presence and flawless comic timing.

Amber Zion, John Maucere and Brenda Patterson in 'Orpheus & Erica' at Victory Hall Opera



An experienced mezzo and a credible actress, Brenda Patterson put her glossy and fluid voice to good use as Orpheus, singing persuasively with a steady tone and resilient vocal line. Jennifer Zetlan was Eurydice. She delivered a thoughtful portrayal and her interactions with Erica were affecting. She sang cleanly and clearly, with a convincing tone and secure top notes. A countertenor just starting his career, Chuanyuan Liu was very sure of himself dramatically, which worked to his advantage in the funnier scenes, when the audience appreciated his antics. However, his big and attractive voice needs to be brought under better control—there were moments when he sounded over-loud and piercing. The chorus sang vigorously, with an excellent sense of balance.

Christine Brandes conducted with her back to the principals and the chorus. She favoured slow tempos, but not so slow as to make the score drag—her nuanced and expansive reading was never at the singers' expense and she managed to inject urgency with good effect into passages that might have lacked tension. HÉCTOR LUISI

### Chicago

At a time when the LGBTQ community is under renewed attack from culture-war extremists in US politics, the cautionary tale that is *The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing*, which was given its premiere by CHICAGO OPERA THEATER on March 23 at the HARRIS THEATER in downtown Chicago, could hardly have been more timely.

The new opera by the New York-based composer Justine F. Chen and librettist David Simpatico was the culmination of a decade of creative development involving COT and its music director, Lidiya Yankovskaya. The conductor had led early vocal workshops of *Turing* at American Lyric Theater and, more recently, an orchestral workshop in Chicago. Her committed leadership of the premiere performance was decisive to the success of Chen and Simpatico's semi-biographical portrait of the British computer scientist, mathematician and theorist who was instrumental in cracking Nazi codes during World War II but was later sentenced to chemical castration following his arrest and conviction for 'gross indecency' as a homosexual. The circumstances of Turing's death by cyanide poisoning, at 41, in 1954, remain cloaked in mystery. While originally ruled a suicide, his death has also been theorized as accidental, or a murder orchestrated by the British government.

The opera's creators push for the suicide theory even as they hint, in a touch of sci-fi fantasy, that Turing's spirit was 'uploaded' to the realm of computation where it would remain until his exoneration decades later. (The librettist, in an interview, described *Turing* as a 'fantasia'.) Playing with several layers of temporal and physical reality at the same time, the opera effectively integrates a Greek chorus of sternly judgmental university dons into the action, choristers peeling off to assume bit parts.

The primary focus is on the young Turing's friendship with Christopher Morcom, his first love; also his relationships with his mother Sara, and his would-be fiancée and co-worker Joan Clarke. Turing the scientist apparently interested the opera's creators less than Turing the gay man: nowhere is there a scene in which he actually cracks the Germans' 'Enigma' code. Also missing are breakout moments of melodic expansion, although the lyrical parlando of Chen's well-crafted score propels the action effectively, at times evoking the mechanized rattle of the decoding machines.