

# THE REHEARSAL STUDIO

A PLACE TO EXERCISE IDEAS BEFORE WRITING ABOUT THEM WITH GREATER DISCIPLINE.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2019

## Forster Ill-Served by Tedious New Opera



Sara Duchovnay as Helen Schlegel and Michael Dailey as Leonard Bast in *Howard's End, America*

Last night at Z Space, Earplay in partnership with RealOpera presented the world premiere of *Howards End, America*. As might be guessed from the title, the three-act opera is a reconception of E. M. Forster's novel *Howards End*, translating the narrative from England at the beginning of the twentieth century to the United States in the middle of that same century. *Howards End, America* is the seventh collaboration of composer Allen Shearer and librettist Claudia Stevens.

As is the case with any novel that manages to survive through future generations of readers, there are a variety of ways to interpret the plot of *Howards End*. The opera's libretto suggests that Stevens read the book as an impassioned critique of British class consciousness, expressed through the dark consequences that ensue. Transplanting Forster's settings to Boston in the Fifties was definitely an inspired move on Stevens' part. World War II may have equalized those in the trenches, but those who lived in and around Boston came home to class distinctions that were as sharp as they were before Adolf Hitler rose to power.

As a result, the upper-class Wilcox family transplants easily into the world of the Boston Brahmins, while the poverty-stricken Basts inhabit a world all but entirely unknown to those Brahmins. By casting them as

STEPHEN SMOLIAR



The author's construction of his reality of self!

ABOUT ME

STEPHEN SMOLIAR

Still trying to "liberate the mind from fear, superstition and pettiness."

[VIEW MY COMPLETE PROFILE](#)

RELATED LINKS

[Al Jazeera English](#)

[Archives from Examiner.com](#)

[Beyond Rehearsal](#)

[Civic Center](#)

[Reflections Beyond Technology \(my old blog\)](#)

[San Francisco Conservatory of Music](#)

BLOG ARCHIVE

▼ 2019 (131)

▼ February (63)

blacks, Stevens underscored that distance by suggesting that the Bastis were, for all intents and purposes, “invisible,” thus evoking the spirit of Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel. Between these two extremes are situated the intellectual Schlegel sisters (brother Tibby does not make it into the libretto), clearly right at home in a metropolitan area that abounds with institutions of higher learning.

John Cage used to enjoy citing a Zen proverb to the effect that trying to change the world only makes matters worse. That proverb could easily be the model of Forster’s novel; and it thrives just as heartily in Stevens’ libretto. Sadly, however, that is the best that can be said of the entire opera. The text never successfully cuts to the core of the characters in these three social strata; and, because the characters themselves are so inadequately realized, one never grasps the dire implications that arise through their many encounters with each other. Instead, the text plods through a tedious account of this-happened-and-then-that-happened that always seems to miss out on critical aspects of personality types and the contextual settings in which they are embedded.

Just as sadly, Shearer’s score never compensates for the weaknesses of the libretto. Indeed, more often than not, the music seems to serve little purpose than to provide a platform upon which the words may be declaimed. Ironically, music figures significantly in both Forster’s novel and Stevens’ libretto. The opera begins with both Leonard Bast and Helen Schlegel leaving Symphony Hall, where Ludwig van Beethoven’s Opus 125 (“Choral”) symphony in D minor has just been performed. Later on we learn that Jacky Bast used to be a successful jazz singer, now fallen on hard times, probably a victim of the addictions that plagued Billie Holiday. Sadly, Shearer never seems to have developed an ear for jazz as it was practiced in the Fifties, while the Beethoven quotes come across as gratuitous, rather than as signposts along the path of the narrative.

Many of these weaknesses probably could have been overcome, or at least muted, by perceptive stage direction. Sadly, Philip Lowery’s efforts lacked that perception. Thus, while the class distinctions were clear, through Lowery’s direction they came through as little more than cardboard stereotypes. Indeed, there were times when characters like both Schlegel sisters (Sara Duchovnay as Helen and Nikki Einfeld as Margaret) and the young Charles Wilcox (Daniel Cilli) were so exaggerated as to be absurd. Only Philip Skinner managed to capture the helplessness of Henry Wilcox as he realizes that he is drawn into complexities from which he had assumed he would be immune. Furthermore, Skinner was not afraid to own up to the fact that, at the

Berlioz’ Operas on Warner Classics  
Opera Parallèle to Premiere  
Opera about O’Keeffe  
Next Month NCCO will Dwell on the Last Century  
Cappella SF Program “Unveils” New Compositions  
Rademann’s Schütz Project Concludes!  
Kyuhee Park Coming to Dynamite Guitars Series  
Roles Played by Pianist Adam Tandler  
Vänskä Continues Mahler Project with “Resurrection...”  
Nomad Session to Premiere Benavides Piece  
Forster Ill-Served by Tedious New Opera  
SFS to Present “Preview” Concert for Tour  
In the Lower Register with Josh Sinton  
Garrick Ohlsson’s First All-Brahms Recital  
A New Book About Mahalia Jackson and Gospel  
Sean Jones to Give Final Concert with Conversation...  
Schubert Sung by a Young Tenor on the Rise  
Schumann Lieder Project Advances to Volume 8  
From February to March at the Luggage Store  
Other Minds to Begin Annual Festival Next Month  
Wadada Leo Smith Honors Rosa Parks  
Wold’s Latest Opera Revisits Horrors of WWI

very end of the tale, his character is as clueless as he was at the beginning.

Mind you, trying to translate as sophisticated a narrative as Forster had conceived into opera was clearly an ambitious undertaking; but last night that ambition needed to be made of sterner stuff.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 7:47 AM 

LABELS: BEETHOVEN, JAZZ, LITERATURE, MUSIC, OPERA, SOCIAL THEORY

---

## NO COMMENTS:

[Post a Comment](#)

## LINKS TO THIS POST

[Create a Link](#)

[Newer Post](#)

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)

[Tiberghien's Solo Album](#)

[Explores Late Liszt](#)

[The Bleeding Edge: 2/18/2019](#)

[A Delightful Afternoon of Bach](#)

[Cantatas from ABS](#)

[Generous Sampling of Schulhoff](#)

[from Capriccio](#)

[Annual SFCO Fundraising Gala](#)

[Goes Latin](#)

[SFP to Present Haimovitz](#)

[Jamming with Iyer](#)

[New Music for Saxophone-](#)

[Bassoon Duet](#)

[Marlboro Musicians Coming to](#)

[Morrison Series](#)

[ASQ and Yang Premiere Samuel](#)

[Carl Adams](#)

[Delightful Bach and Tedious](#)

[Mendelssohn](#)

[Berlioz' Sacred Music on](#)

[Warner Classics](#)

[Chanticleer to Continue Season](#)

[Next Month](#)

[Adobe Books: February and](#)

[March, 2019](#)

[New Michael Byron Album from](#)

[Cold Blue Music](#)

[San Francisco Nonagenarian](#)

[Makes SFP Debut](#)

[Von Otter will be Soloist at Next](#)

[PBO Concert](#)

[Composer Puts Meyer Sound](#)

[Through its Paces](#)

[61st GRAMMY Awards Less](#)

[Satisfying than 60th](#)

[The Bleeding Edge: 2/11/2019](#)

[Another Side of Shostakovich](#)

[from Other Minds](#)

[Warner's Berlioz: Vocal and](#)

[Choral Works](#)