

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Review: A surrealist operatic campfire story enlivens Snapshot showcase



Joshua Kosman | April 11, 2022



Soprano Julia Hathaway (left) and mezzo-soprano Molly Mahoney in “The School for Girls Who Lost Everything in the Fire”
Photo: West Edge Opera

There’s a pleasurable kind of shiver, a compound of fear and eager anticipation, that is familiar to anyone who’s been warmed beside a campfire by a ghost story. “I don’t want to hear this,” it says — and also, “I can’t stand to miss a thing.”

That deep, slightly shameful tingle suffuses “The School for Girls Who Lost Everything in the Fire,” a beguiling operatic work in progress by composer Ryan Suleiman and librettist Cristina Frías. A 15-minute excerpt was among the five offerings presented on Sunday, April 10, as part of Snapshot — the annual showcase program of West Edge Opera and the new music group Earplay — and it reconfirmed this young partnership’s powerful ability to create mysterious worlds in the less-than-promising realm of operatic surrealism.

feral canines. “School,” which was among the final candidates for West Edge’s commissioning program Aperture, seems to be working a similar sorcery at greater length.

As in the earlier work, the title here presumably tells us everything we’re going to know; Frías isn’t big on a detailed backstory. There was a fire, now there’s a school, the girls are living there, take it or leave it.

The one plot element left out of the title is the Barn Man, a nocturnal stalker who may or may not be coming to spirit one of the girls away (and who may or may not exist). In the extended scene presented Sunday in San Francisco’s Taube Atrium Theater, conducted by Earplay’s Mary Chun and vibrantly sung by soprano Julia Hathaway and mezzo-soprano Molly Mahoney, two of the girls pass a sleepless night speculating on the matter.

What if the Barn Man shows up? Scary! What if he doesn’t? Scarier still!



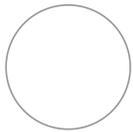
Librettist Cristina Frías captures the dream logic of the piece with minimal backstory.
Photo: West Edge Opera

The dialogue, sparse as it is, perfectly catches the dream logic of the situation, and Suleiman’s score does its part to create a web of elusive musical metaphor. There’s a soft but implacable rhythmic tread that references both the Barn Man’s ominous prowling and the pacing of the story about him. When a dense miasma of smoke still lingering from the fire settles around the school, Suleiman conjures it up with a flurry of disparate melodic scales, rapidly ascending and descending.

The rest of the unstaged program, for which Chun shared conducting duties with Dana Sadava, ranged widely in style and subject matter.

“Lilith,” by Bay Area composer and librettist Michael Kaulkin, is an adaptation of the 1961 novel by J. R. Salamanca about a manipulative patient in a mental institution who ensnares the naive but well-intentioned therapist attending her (it became a lurid 1964 movie starring Jean Seberg and Warren Beatty). In Sunday’s excerpt, the two main characters (sung by Hathaway and baritone Julio Ferrari) go for a bike ride, and Kaulkin’s rippling, light-footed music conveys their teasing dialogue – as well as the moment when things turn darker.

“Remembrance,” a brief meditation by composer-librettist Jean Ahn on the aftereffects of the Korean War, was the one piece done in full. There were also excerpts from composer-librettist Gabrielle Rosse’s “Cristina Doesn’t Need Saving,” a grim narrative about a young girl being trafficked for sex, and “The Dark Horse,” a vivacious treatment by composer Cesar Cancino and librettist Scott DeTurk about the life of the auto racing pioneer Enzo Ferrari. Each excerpt included passages that made one intrigued to hear the work at fuller length, but “School” stood out as the most promising prospect of the bunch.



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Also loved "School." It captured my attention in a way no other piece on the program did.

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