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Opera review: 'The Kiss' by Smetana charms Saint Louis



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Opera Theatre of Saint Louis' production of 'The Kiss' by Bedřich Smetana

Rating:

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Saturday evening, June 22, **Opera Theatre of Saint Louis** staged "The Kiss," the 1876 folk opera by Czech composer Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884). Smetana's eight operas are rarely performed in this country, and this production, which originated at the 2010 Ireland's **Wexford Festival Opera**, proves such neglect unjustifiable. "Hubička" is the opera's Czech title, here presented in

David Poutney's English translation.

Set Designer James Macnamara debuted at OTSL with this production. His minimalist concept provided just enough props to suggest locale. For example, a crib showed we were inside someone's home, though nothing else having a house-y appearance was in sight. A handsome sliding backdrop made of stained wood planks of different varieties formed a massive marquetry resembling a puzzle. Sections parted in various ways by sliding or pivoting, depending on the desired effect.

The plot revolves around Lukáš, a young widower, and his childhood sweetheart, Vendulka. The rich orchestral prelude exhibits its kinship to the composer's series of six symphonic tone poems, "**Má vlast**" (**My homeland**)—composed contemporaneously with the opera.

Choreographer Seán Curran took advantage of this opening to stage a funeral in pantomime. Lukáš, holding a newborn infant, pays his last respects at his wife's coffin. In the procession to the gravesite, he glimpses Vendulka, and while the crowd freeze, the two discover silently that the love they once shared has obviously survived his arranged marriage. They nearly kiss when Lukáš remembers his place and rejoins the procession.

No sooner than Act I gets underway than we hear that Lukáš intends to propose marriage to Vendulka. Her blustery father, Palouký Otec, convincingly played by bass-baritone Matthew Burns, foresees disaster should the two marry, due to their stubbornness; they are too alike.

Lukáš readily arrives and eventually ekes out a begrudging blessing from his future father-in-law. Tenor Garrett Sorenson's blazing voice projected his lines with the greatest clarity of all cast members. He proposes, Vendulka accepts, but she refuses to give him the traditional kiss to seal the deal. In a subsequent scene we learn her sensible reasons: to show honour to his deceased wife, Vendulka won't kiss Lukáš until they wed.

Lukáš rants. He raves. "You'd kiss me if you loved me," he presses, a line yet much in use fully 137 years later. "Since you won't, you obviously don't," he reasons. Over Vendulka's conscientious objections, Lukáš argues, "What's a kiss after all? It's not important, so why don't you kiss me?" Oh yeah? Well, if it's not that big a deal, why have you made such a big deal over it?

Soprano Corinne Winters sang the role of Vendulka with a voice of passionate strength and during tenderer moments, velvety softness, such as her lullaby to Lukáš's baby, in which she swears to love him as if he were her own child.

When Vendulka refuses to yield, the proposal appears to rupture. Lukáš goes on a drinking binge in which he humiliates Vendulka, calling her frigid.

At this point something is missing from the libretto, because Vendulka's Aunt Martinka,

sung sympathetically by mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Batton, next convinces Vendulka to join her in a little smuggling. Just why that is the logical alternative to marriage does not become clear, even during the extensive Act-II smugglers scene.

Three debuting artists interpreted roles instrumental in reuniting the couple: Lukáš's brother-in-law Tomeš, performed by Matthew Worth with honeyed baritone, smuggler Matouš, which bass-baritone Charles Z. Owen acquitted with aplomb, and servant-girl Barče, whose sole aria soprano Emily Duncan-Brown sang expressively with beauty of tone and overwhelming power.

Conductor Anthony Barrese, debuting with OTSL, told Examiner.com he learned the score specifically for this production. Betraying no lack of familiarity, he led a crisp reading of the score, which overflows with Slavonic dance tunes and Smetana's unmistakable orchestral patina. Chorus Master Robert Ainsley achieved amazing results getting the augmented ensemble to project their varying vocal lines in utter unity.

OTSL proudly champions new works, with both world premieres (23 since inception) and North American premieres (23), such as "The Kiss." "**Champion,**" in fact, is this year's world premiere, a story of boxing champion Emile Griffith, who meets for the first time Benny "The Kid" Paret, the now full-grown son of an opponent who died during a fatal 1962 boxing match. Director of Marketing and Public Relations Joe Gfaller said the run of six performances is one of the only OTSL world premieres to have sold out completely and has generated excitement among press and public alike. The composer of jazz-inflected "Champion" is five-time Grammy Award-winner Terence Blanchard with a libretto by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Michael Cristofer. Three performances remain.

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