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The Kiss, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Loretto-Hilton Center, Webster University, USA – review

By George Loomis

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Corinne Winters and Garrett Sorenson in 'The Kiss'

Summer opera festivals in the United States tend to shy away from operas that are too long or too meaty, but even so Smetana's 1876 opera *The Kiss* (*Hubička*) is lightweight fare. The libretto by Eliška Krásnohorská sets the action in the Czech countryside – familiar territory to Smetana aficionados – where the kiss in question is what the lovely Vendulka refuses to indulge in with Lukáš even though they've just become engaged. To act otherwise, she thinks, would be unseemly, given that Lukáš's prior wife had only recently expired. Understandably frustrated, Lukáš takes up with a couple of tavern girls, whereupon he and Vendulka are history.

Just about everyone else in the opera wants them back together – even the leader of a band of smugglers that Vendulka implausibly tries to join – yet it takes all of a dramatically plodding second act for rapprochement to occur, and then only after Lukáš goes through some anguishing verbal self-laceration. What almost saves Opera Theatre's production is the vocal quality of the two leads,

plus the irresistibly sunny music, redolent of Czech folk idioms, that Smetana lavished on the story, almost as if it were his masterpiece, *The Bartered Bride*. You sometimes have the feeling that he may have put the flimsy libretto out of his mind and simply wrote music that came to him naturally, including the wonderful detail of an almost Wagnerian depiction of a sunrise in sustained C major.

As Vendulka, Corinne Winters, a young American soprano who scored in English National Opera's *La traviata* earlier this year, is a delightful stage presence and sings with a voice of resonance and lustre, though she occasionally pushed unnecessarily in the Opera Theatre's intimate hall. As Lukáš, Garrett Sorenson also produces high-quality tone in generous quantities. Matthew Worth and Emily Duncan-Brown make excellent contributions as Lukáš's brother-in-law Tomeš and the maid Barče, but Matthew Burns lacks the proper orotund bass voice for the music of Vendulka's father. The conductor Anthony Barrese presides routinely over members of the Saint Louis Symphony and the Opera Theater's excellent chorus of young singers.

Michael Gieleta's fluent staging in a co-production with the Wexford Festival basically takes the opera as it finds it. James Macnamara's set consists of a grassy floor bordered by an abstract wooden structure that wants to be a forest, and Fabio Toblini's costumes unobtrusively update the action. But it's too bad that *The Kiss* packs so little passion.



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