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In-jokes abound in Santa Fe Opera's 'Impressario'

Entertainment Theater

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Soprano Erin Morley is shown in a scene from "Le Rossignol," (The Nightingale) at the Santa Fe Opera. (Courtesy of Ken Howard/The Santa Fe Opera)

It was a night at the opera quite unlike any I've ever witnessed.

Last Saturday saw the premiere of the Santa Fe Opera's double bill, an early farce by Mozart, "The Impressario," followed by Stravinsky's "Le Rossignol" (the Nightingale).

Comedy is the first literary element to fall by the boards. It's not so much that jokes lose their humor, but that the context quickly drifts into a sea of forgotten references. Virtually all the jokes in Shakespeare need to be explained, and when you have to explain a joke...

With the SFO's "Impressario," the remedy has been found. The spoken sections of this singspiele (essentially operetta) have not only been translated but transplanted into situations of comedy for contemporary audiences, even though the time period is now the early Soviet Union.

The piece is played for high comedy derived from the enormous task of producing an opera and the battle of egos of competing singers. Opera in-jokes abound with Mozart all but relegated to the background. (I enjoyed finding the composer's little satirical bon-bon Bona nox – Good night, you silly ass – in the comic mix).

The impressario (Anthony Michaels-Moore) has it in mind to produce "The Nightingale," hardly a box-office draw, despite his company's dwindling revenues. A slew of hopeful singers invade his office, each auditioning with outrageous demonstrations. Otto van der Puff, the buffo artist (bass Kevin Burdette), gives a patter song as if Gilbert & Sullivan were put on fast-forward. The arias are as much comedy routines as singing.

As has often been pointed out, Stravinsky's "The Nightingale" is a hybrid of styles. The first act sounds much like his "Firebird," having been written at about the same time – impressionist, even lyrical. The final two scenes, written after "The Rite of Spring," are in a much more dissonant idiom.

Stravinsky attempted to rationalize the discrepancy saying the machinations of the Imperial Court required a contrasting sound from the natural atmosphere of the fisherman, but the difference in style is never reconciled musically.

These two entirely disparate works, an 18th-century farce and Stravinsky's clearly 20th-century setting of a fairytale by Hans Christian Anderson, are cleverly integrated, even sometimes to a fault. The impressario's office is transformed into the world of ancient China by way of a nickel tour of early Modernist art.

High soprano Erin Morley, as Adelina Vocedoro-Gambalunghi in the first work, gives a stunning

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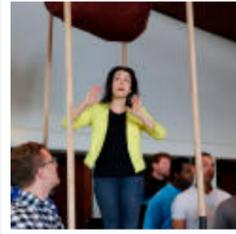


performance as the voice of the nightingale. Bruce Sledge lends his robust tenor to the role of the fisherman. Long-time Santa Fe favorite Kenneth Montgomery leads the orchestra in this brilliantly colored dreamscape.

Indeed the colors of the sets and costumes well match the exoticism of the music. I could have done without the chorus of male dancers in berets and handlebar moustaches (Stravinsky? Dali? Groucho Marx?), though their painting of the Miro-like canvases on large screens is a tour-de-force special effect, whatever it may have to do with the dying emperor.

Overall the production is quite stunning – an evening of opera one will not soon forget.

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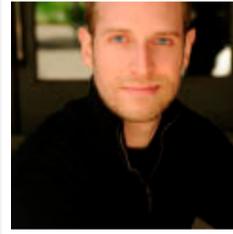
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