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Smetana

Hubička – Folk-opera in two acts to a libretto by Eliška Krásnohorská after the story by Karoliňa Svetlá [sung in Czech with English surtitles]

Vendulka – Pumeza Matshikiza

Paloucký Otec – Jiří Příbyl

Lukáš – Peter Berger

Tomeš – Pavel Břanský

Martinka – Eliška Weissová

Matouš – Bradley Smoak

Barče – Ekaterina Bakanová

Strážník – Robert Anthony Gardiner

Prague Chamber Choir

Orchestra of Wexford Festival Opera

Jaroslav Kyzlink

Michael Gieleta – Director

James Macnamara – Set design

Fabio Toblini – Costume design

Christopher Akerlind – Lighting design

Séan Curran – Choreography

Wexford Festival Opera – Smetana's Hubička (The Kiss)

Wednesday, October 27, 2010 Wexford Opera House, Ireland

Reviewed by Alexander Campbell

Smetana's "Hubička" rarely gets a staging outside the Czech Republic or Slovakia these days, and even in those countries it is very much regarded as a simple folk opera. This is in some part due to its gloriously tuneful score which ostensibly bustles along very merrily, and a book that is seemingly rather lightweight. In truth, it is rather more than that in that the domestic quarrel that threatens to curtail the forthcoming



engagement and marriage of the sensitive yet determined Vendulka to the rather more headstrong and emotionally flaky widower Lukáš is a serious one that teeters on being devastating for all who surround them. Her father, Paloucký Otec, warns that the couple are too alike, and if it seems his premonitions are rather light-heartedly uttered (musically at least), they have a seriousness undertone. Yes, it is true that Vendulka's embarking on a career of smuggling to make her point seems a little far-fetched, but no more so than the plots of many other operas.

Unlike the earlier "The Bartered Bride" there are fewer passages of the vocal music that can be excerpted, the accompaniment having a dance-like quality throughout. Smetana was moving towards through-composed opera like many composers of the time. He was certainly familiar with the earlier works of Wagner, which were popular in his native Prague. Indeed, there is a striking musical transformation scene linking the final two scenes of "Hubička" that can be heard to have echoes of the final pages of "Das Rheingold". Here it blazed from the pit.

This 2010 production was the Wexford Festival's second go at this opera, and it fielded an extremely well-matched team of soloists. As Vendulka, Pumeza Matshikiza revealed a voice of huge potential, velvety and warm in tone and it projects well. The upper reaches retain tonal beauty – though on occasion she sounded stretched in the more dramatic outbursts. She also has an attractive and strong stage-presence, although she could be a little more reactive facially to dramatic situation. The highlight of her portrayal was her hushed singing of the lullaby-prayer 'Hajej, můj andílku', an exquisite aria that is a striking predecessor to similar passages in other Czech opera such as Janáček's "Jenůfa". Indeed, it is hard to understand why this *scena* is not encountered more in operatic recitals.



Matshikiza was ably partnered by the Slovakian tenor Peter Berger who sang and acted a sterling and credible Lukáš. His voice has both a ringing and open quality that is absolutely right for this music and it also has both lyricism and, where needed, heft. He has an easy stage presence too. He made the most of his Act Two aria 'Já nešťastník'. It would be good to hear him in roles like the Prince in "Rusalka" in which his vocal characteristics would be ideal. The two interacted very well in their various duets and were emotive in their physical interplay. If Lukáš appears a bit of a bully that is part and parcel of the piece, and Berger certainly made his character's realisation of the motivation behind Vendulka's refusal to kiss Lukáš work. One was left wondering how the character must have treated his first wife!

Although the two lovers carry much of the opera vocally, good support is needed. Jiří Příbyl brought his sonorous bass to the part of Paloucký Otec, and if his acting was a bit too obviously a young man portraying an older one, that is the fate of young operatic basses! Eliška Weissová was a sympathetic Martinka, and displayed her fruity voice to effect. Ekaterina Bakanová grabbed her moment in the spotlight



as the maid Barče as she greeted the dawn.

The Orchestra of Wexford Festival Opera responded well to Jaroslav Kyzlink’s conducting – the music had rhythmic vitality and force where needed, with warmth to the strings and lovely flute playing too. The lower brass was also effective – wonderfully raspy in the introduction to Lukáš’s first utterances.

Michael Gieleta’s production was strong in terms of direction of the principal singers, although the chorus could perhaps have been more imaginatively handled, and acting too much ‘as one’. The ensemble that follows found the chorus singing well, although it might have been even more impressive had the singers started off more quietly to make

the build-up of dynamic more effective, although this may be an effect of the extremely immediate acoustic of Wexford’s new auditorium. James Macnamara’s warm and colourful pastoral settings were pleasant on the eye.

All in all this was a evening of genial entertainment, and with some lovely singing, one felt ready to saunter out of the theatre back to the real world where even the sudden downpour could not dampen the spirits too much.

- Further performance on 30 October
- Wexford Festival Opera (<http://www.wexfordopera.com>)

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