

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

SILENT NIGHT

BY KEVIN PUTS | FEBRUARY 21, 25, 27, MARCH 1, 2015

‘SILENT NIGHT’ PROOF OPERA IS NOT A DEAD MEDIUM

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By Kelly Luck

KCSTAGE

It has been rightly observed that one of the essential tools in war is the dehumanisation of the enemy. People generally are not, by nature, killers: it is something they have to be (as the song notes) carefully taught. Reduce the enemy to a faceless mass of evil, or heresy, or whatever you like and suddenly it's a lot easier to snuff them out. But sometimes the system breaks down: sometimes we are reminded of the enemy's humanity and, subsequently, our own. That this happens despite everything speaks volumes about us as a species. That we then are generally able to go right back to killing each other speaks even more.

“Silent Night” is a new (2011) opera by Kevin Puts and Mark Campbell, based on the well-known “Christmas Truce” of 1914. Taking place at various points along the Western Front, British, German and French troops exchanged souvenirs, allowed each other to retrieve and bury their dead, and generally fraternized with each other. The opera takes place at one such occasion, with forces from all three armies joining together over Christmas Eve to sing, drink, and mourn. In the aftermath, the respective commands come down hard on the troops, sending them away to the front lines where more brutal fighting is occurring.

It is always gratifying to see new work being done in the opera world, and particularly when it takes on subjects not generally approached. Fortunately, even leaving these factors to one side, “Silent Night” succeeds extremely well. It is undoubtedly a contemporary opera--one can both see and hear the influence of 20th century musical theatre--but its modern feel does not in fact clash with the period of the work. There are some notable arias here, such as when Lt Audebert (Liam Bonner, bar.) of the French army totes up the day's casualties, and and sings to his wife at home. Then there is “Anytime, Anywhere,” in which singer Anna Sørensen (Erin Wall, sopr.) sings of the moment every wife or mother waiting at home dreads: receiving the news that their soldier will not be coming back.

The cast was in good voice as of Saturday night's performance: Sean Panikkar is charming as the Sprink, the tenor and Sørensen's duet partner/lover who finds himself pulled away to the trenches. Craig Irvin (bar.) is gruff and Teutonic as Lt Horstmayer, his all-business CO. David Blalock (ten.) is poignant as Jonathan Dale, a young Scottish soldier whose loss of his brother William makes him incapable of seeing the Germans with anything but bitterness and rage. Andrew Wilkowske (bar.) is charismatic as Ponchel, Lt. Audebert's aide-de-camp. Also, we would be remiss if we did not note the work of the ensemble as the three armies. They get rather a lot to do in this production, as well you may imagine, and they rise to the occasion, even performing the fight choreography rather well.

The stagecraft very impressive, the props and sets coming from the Minnesota Opera where this work had its premiere. David Charles Abell ably conducted the orchestra through its paces, and the lighting and sound were up to the Lyric's usual standards. This reviewer would also like to note Jim Higgins, who performed on the bagpipes, a personal favorite instrument and used to great effect throughout the performance.

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Campbell states the thesis of the play, if such it may be called, is that when your enemy becomes human in your eyes, war is no longer sustainable. I wish I could agree with that, but the unfortunate truth is we humans are masters of burying our humanity and that of others, even when it stares us in the face. And here we are, one hundred years from that night of peace, and in a world of police actions, roadside bombs, unmanned drones being flown by remote control half a world away. Another Christmas truce is increasingly unlikely in this world of technological disconnect. When the 1914 truce became public, the respective military commands came down hard on the participants, dispersing them and ensuring there was no recurrence in the years that followed. If any such thing were to happen in, say, Iraq, it would most likely turn out to be staged, a PR stunt to drum up support and burnish the Good Guys image. And so it goes.

It is an unexpected experience to find oneself sitting and watching an opera of such contemporary tone and subject matter. As a veteran, there was also that level of concern as to whether or not people without military experience could really capture what it is like. Leaving the performance last night, however, this reviewer had to admit that by and large they had got it right. "Silent Night" succeeds musically, and dramatically, and more than anything else it proves that opera as an art form is still alive and vital and relevant as ever it was.