

# LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

## SILENT NIGHT

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

---

### JOYOUS MOMENT: KC LYRIC TACKLES BOLD NEW OPERA ASKING 'BIG QUESTIONS' ABOUT WAR

February 24, 2015

By Paul Horsley

*The* INDEPENDENT  
WWW.KCINDEPENDENT.COM

*Silent Night* is the product of a top-flight librettist, Mark Campbell, and a marvelous American composer, Kevin Puts, and it features some of the most beautifully intricate sets, projections and costumes that the Lyric Opera of Kansas City has put on the stage. Created and designed for Minnesota Opera and three other co-commissioners, it tells a moving and indelible World War I story of Scottish, French and German troops gathering in No Man's Land on December 24th, 1914 to celebrate what would be, for many of them, their last Christmas. Based partly on a 2005 film *Joyeux Noël*, which was in turn inspired by real (and perhaps conflated) events that took place on the Belgian front that Christmas, the opera won the Pulitzer Prize for Music and has been produced several times since its Minneapolis premiere in November 2011. If it has some faults as a piece of theater, most notably a shortage of convincing solo-vocal "moments," the sheer power of its real-life story and the gorgeously outfitted orchestral music have made it into a special moment in the history of recent American opera.

Not surprisingly it has become a go-to opera for companies around the country during the World War I centenary commemorations, and the Opening Night performance at the Kauffman Center (February 21st) was attended by several members of the creative team, as well as historians and other experts who had gathered for pre-performance activities connected to KC's National World War I Museum.

At the center of the action of *Silent Night* is a rotating mound of what appear to be sandbags, which is configured variously as a palace, a village church, and different domestic interiors on which a wide range of action unfolds. Around the turntable are smaller pieces of props, which sometimes rotate in the opposite direction, including a church bell tower that, when it's turned upstage after the Act I battle appears as wreckage reminiscent of Berlin's Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis-Kirche (itself a World War II ruin, the blunted tower of which has been left in place as a memorial to war).

The two-act, two-and-a-half-hour opera opens with a striking *coup de théâtre*: A scene from what sounds like a Mozart opera is being sung by soprano Anna Sorensen (Erin Wall) and tenor Nikolaus Sprink (Sean Panikkar), who are dressed as 18th-century nobility. At first one is taken aback by the Classic-period music: Is this the opera? With startling abruptness the "performance" is interrupted by a German general (Robert Gibby Brand) announcing that war is on, that Germany is "under siege," and that it will defend its honor. (The opera-within-an-opera is telling, for as the duo sings of being united for "one night only" we suspect this might be prophetic of what will actually happen to them.)

From here the music grows dark and dissonant, as we're plunged into the rich orchestral fabric for which Kevin was already well-known even before he began composing operas. (On March 7th the Minnesota Opera presents the premiere of Kevin's second opera, *The Manchurian Candidate*, also with a libretto by Mark Campbell.) We see two young Scottish brothers Jonathan

(sung sweetly by tenor David Blalock) and William (Caleb C. Ashby) gung-ho about dashing off to war, while their pastor (Daniel Belcher) eyes the coming onslaught helplessly. Meanwhile in France, stately Lieutenant Audebert (Liam Bonner), the opera's sort of moral center, tells his pregnant wife (Samantha Gossard) that duty calls him to the field. A muscular male chorus (nicely prepared by the Lyric's Mark Ferrell) joins the complex solo ensemble with a stirring trilingual war-cry ("Attack!" "Der Sieg ist unser!" "Pour la justice!"). As the Scottish, German and French soldiers don their uniforms we are transported with a jolt to the battlefield, conveyed with explosive realism on a screen upstage and a downstage scrim. As dust settles, Sprink stands alone, William is dead, and Audebert sings a grim sort of "catalogue aria" of the casualties, interjected with regrets at having lost his wallet, and his wife's photo, in the skirmish.

The tender "Sleep Chorus" that ensues combines restful harmonies with jabs of doubt and fear, but sunrise brings new hope and this is the point at which each of the three camps begin receiving Christmas packages from their command posts. "Christmas trees ... with tinsel ... ridiculous!" sings Horstmayer (Craig Irvin), the German lieutenant. Liam sings with noble richness even if at times one yearns for a more tenacious "long line." As Audebert's trusty sidekick, Ponchel, Andrew Wilkowski proves himself a singer and actor of great wit and character. Erin as Anna (transported, momentarily, to the Kronprinz' castle, for an overlong duet that again misses a chance to inject vocal substance into the score) sings with lovely bloom and Sean as Sprink has a clear tenor and passable German. Craig Colclough as the Scottish Lieutenant Gordon possessed perhaps the most beautiful voice onstage, though he didn't have a lot to sing. Among the other soloists, Daniel Belcher brought pathos to his role as Father Palmer and John Stephens was convincingly stolid as Audebert's hard-nosed father. Doug Jones is the hyperactive, almost comically dictatorial Kronprinz.

The emotional epicenter of the opera is of course the famous truce, the "Joyous Noel," in which would-be enemies decide that, since the war's not going to be settled that night anyway, they might as well find out what they share in common. And it turns out they have a lot in common: hearts, brains, families, wives, girlfriends, and a taste for laughter and a good drink. The Scots bring whiskey, the French wine and chocolates, the Germans Christmas trees. All this forms an incredibly touching finale to Act I, featuring an affecting if perhaps musically unexceptional "Dona nobis pacem" led by Anna, who has (rather implausibly) shown up on the front lines to help cheer up the troops.

After this scene, though, the question becomes: What's left for Act II? Of course it would have been folly to end the opera with the truce, so Act II grows from the grim (and historically accurate) reality that the generals were not at all happy with this little "Kumbaya." If you get too close to your enemy, he starts to look like you, and a commanding officer's work becomes complicated. What Act II of *Silent Night* does have going for it is some of the most beautiful music I've heard recently, especially the soaring textures at the beginning, as the dead are buried and Horstmayer returns Audebert's wallet. The latter is in some ways a moment as potent as the truce: Having seen on Audebert's ID where he lived in France, his German counterpart recalls having honeymooned there: Basically, two middle-class guys are recognizing with a bit of a shock that they live in the same Europe, in the same world.

Act II also features a series of welcome vocal numbers that help fill out the opera's emotional landscape even while feeling a tad underdeveloped as operatic scenes. The three commanders sing a sympathetic trio proposing the truce be extended into Christmas Day (oh, for some rich, Verdian harmonies!); Anna sings a sort of "women's lament" about the eternal dread that wives and mothers share of receiving that "knock at the door" with the news of war dead; and the three Gentleman Generals sing a bitter, fractured trio decrying the cowardice of those who chose peace over brutality.

Director Octavio Cardenas moved the singers and chorus around the complex set with skill, and brought focus to solo moments as well, though at times one felt a need for a more distinct *visual* delineation between the three camps. The orchestra of Kansas City Symphony musicians in the pit (which included performers on bagpipe and harmonica) played with warmth under David Charles Abell's baton, in his Lyric debut. Costumes by Kärin Kopischke were historically informed and mostly convincing. Marcus Dilliard's lighting, C. Andrew Mayer's sound design, Alison Hanks' makeup and wigs and Andrzej Goulding's projections were skillfully wrought.

It's hard to find a satisfying end to this story: We know that it ended with almost everyone dying or, for those in power, being swept into the dustbin of history. Yet these "peaceniks" are punished by being sent out to the most miserable front lines; that

Nikolaus and Anna defect to the French side before being shot by their own forces offers little consolation. What does have impact is the scene of soldiers reading their own letters home, in a disparate chorus of single voices (using a pointillistic, almost Mahlerian chamber texture)—letters whose very existence we realize formed a source of information about this historical moment. Meanwhile, on screen projections, it's "raining letters," in a dramatic visual moment that forms an emotional closure, of sorts, to the event. For if we can't fix the doomed fate of these men and women, we can at least learn from their story so as not to repeat it.

Or can we?