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Chautauqua The Crucible

Robert Ward's consistently lyrical and appealing 1961 opera *Crucible* started strong, winning the 1962 Pulitzer Prize, and has continued to enjoy a level of uninterrupted critical and audience approval with more than 500 productions worldwide in 44 years.

Chautauqua Opera has been on the *Crucible* bandwagon from the start. Its performances on July 22 and 25 in Chautauqua Institution's Norton Hall represented its fourth production of an opera whose musical and dramatic density present difficulties that would challenge the artistic resources of major companies. The opera is taken from Arthur Miller's 1952 play about the 1692 Salem witch trials and is full of unyieldingly severe, holier-than-thou zealots, some of whose duplicitous lies are cover-ups for furtive land-grabs or sexual misdemeanors. The dramatic intent was to allegorize the witch-hunting activities of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s as he attempted to root out communists from our society.

In this environment, and with 13 major roles, the action and dialog are often so frenzied as to make intelligibility of Bernard Stambler's text almost impossible. This was not the fault of the performers but the density of Ward's vocal and orchestral textures, from which one should not expect any cleaner verbal diction than in a typical large oratorio. Supertitles for the English text would have been a considerable help.

I have seen the last three Chautauqua productions, and each has confirmed my belief that *Crucible* is one of the great American operas. In the July production the company's artistic and general director, Jay Lesenger, was also the stage director.

He and conductor Jerome Shannon instinctively knew that the power of Ward's music is in the cumulative accretion of vocal, orchestral, and dramatic effect rather than in attempts at clarity of texture.

Rather than the ueventual hangings, which

are only the outcome, what makes the opera so absorbing is the organically growing sense of fear that spreads through the hapless, rigid Puritan community. Ward was able to weave these threads into a wonderfully coherent continuum of orchestra, voices, and acting where the total effect was greater than the sum of its parts and where the sense of coherent ensemble was more important than individual performances.

Baritone Brian Davis was strong and resolute as the embattled Proctor, soprano Jane Ohmes played the temptress Abigail with dramatic cunning and a rather tremulous voice, while mezzo Janine Hawley was a pillar of quiet strength as Elizabeth, helping her husband find redemption through truth at the opera's climax. Contralto Sabrina Elayne Carten gave a chilling account of Tituba's spiritual 'The Devil Say He's Coming'. As witchcraft expert Reverend Hale, Ethan Herschenfeld's rather hollow baritone was offset by his dramatic effectiveness. Other important contributions were made by tenor Matthew Chellis as Reverend Parris, contralto Joyce Castle as Rebecca Nurse, and the wiry tenor Jeffrey Halili as the feisty Giles Corey. In addition to Tituba's spiritual, the bracing colonial hymn 'Jesus, My Consolation' at the end of Act I and Judge Danforth's invocation 'Open Thou My Lips' in Act III were the most memorable melodic moments.

Musically, the strongest feature was the sense of continuity heightened by many imaginative orchestral passages that come one episode to the next. The short, piercingly dissonant falling cadence during the final walk to the gallows was a shattering tonal summation of the tragedy.

Visually this production, which Lesenger directed in April for Opera Boston and was reprised in October by Mobile Opera, was a stunner. Steven Capone's set had widely spaced, weathered gray boards for walls and floor that not only eloquently reflected the stern Puritan existence but was easily adaptable for living space, courtroom, barn, or jail interior, with ominous nooses suspended overhead. Prominent use of stark silhouetting distinguished Christopher Ostrom's lighting, and Nancy Leary's brown and reddish brown costumes reinforced the Puritans' Spartan lifestyle.

Above all, it was the extraordinarily inspired stage direction by Lesenger that made the large cast of professionals and apprentices click as a unified performing ensemble and sustained the tenseness and tragedy of this gripping opera.

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