

CHAUTAUQUA — *Werther*, Chautauqua Opera

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Breault as Chautauqua's
Werther

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Chautauqua Opera 2007

Chautauqua Opera's Norton Hall witnessed lavish audience cheers on August 6 for Jay Lesenger's atmospheric, logical production of *Werther*, Joseph Colaneri's finely wrought orchestral achievement and a pleasing cast, particularly local favorite Robert Breault in the lead.

I've heard many famous tenors (and a famous baritone) as Werther; aside from the sublime Alfredo Kraus, Breault furnished the most complete portrayal musically and dramatically. Though no beginner, he proved much more credible as a youthful Romantic poet than Kraus (seen at age fifty-eight in San Francisco). Besides a ductile tenor that allows him to negotiate a full dynamic span, from silvery head tone to ringing forte, even within a single phrase, Breault offers truly superb diction. He put across the not always felicitous Norman Tucker translation (incorporating "I would fain...", a sure sign of trouble) with great aplomb; his chiseled phrasing was a constant pleasure. Alert to his younger colleagues' words and presence, Breault brought every moment of the role to life.

Keri Alkema won her shot at Charlotte with her acclaimed performance last year as Erika in Barber's *Vanessa*. Hers is a fine voice, a plush lyric mezzo with reserves indicating potential development into heavier repertory; range extremes gave her no problem at all. She sang with some feeling and garnered sympathy but as yet did not command the kind of body language or star presence to make Charlotte a completely realized character. More crucially, in the context of Chautauqua's English-only policy, her soft-grained diction generally proved comprehensible only when the vocal line was unaccompanied.

Ava Pine, a dead ringer for Cate Blanchett, made quite a delightful Sophie; her bright, fleet soprano negotiated her music with ease. Jeffrey Madison made a good job of Albert, his baritone finding suitable tenderness in his aria and sufficient iciness for his almost Ibsenesque final cruelty to Charlotte. As the imbibers, David Crawford showed a splendid, rumbustious bass-baritone as Johann, and Gregory Zavracky, as Schmidt, deployed his light tenor musically; but the stage drunkenness was exaggerated. (No Bailiff in his right mind would have let these boozy stumblebums anywhere near his children.) The kids (Danielle Campbell, Aaren Barge, Kierstin Coatney, Emma Held, Brooke Lewis and Brooke Latimer) were adorable onstage, singing their Christmas song very well indeed. Jonathan Moots made a solid, steady Bailiff. Colaneri admirably mustered both orchestral mass and fine detail from his forces.

Nancy Leary's apt period costumes — including a flattering version of Werther's traditional blue waistcoat and yellow vest — and Peter Harrison's finely minimalist sets, lit with discrimination by Christopher Ostrom, filled the bill very nicely. Only Act III's floor-to-ceiling paneled window looked more Art Nouveau than Biedermeier bourgeois, but it did make for an atmospheric, snowfall-backed entrance for Werther. □

DAVID SHENGOLD