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Chautauqua Opera Presents Jules Massenet's 'Werther'

By Robert W. Plyler

CHAUTAUQUA-There is a splendid, brilliant opera on the boards at Norton Hall this week.

Chautauqua Opera is presenting two performances of Jules Massenet's moving "Werther."

It's been artistically an outstanding season at Chautauqua, and for me, this production was the finest performance I've heard yet.

"Werther" is the story of a young poet, who is tutor to a beautiful young woman, with whom he is passionately in love.

Charlotte is the eldest of eight children. Her father is a magistrate, but he is one of those loving parents who has no grasp of caring financially for the family he loves so much. When her mother died, she made Charlotte vow that she would marry the wealthy and stable Albert, with the understanding that the family would be provided for, as a result.

IN REVIEW

The cast of the opera is truly stellar; Robert Breault has a giant voice with a top register which he is able to open to the skies with no visible effort at all, to soar above orchestra and everyone else. Furthermore, he is a fine actor. His character has little action – he pines away from love which is not returned - and he made us care about him, right to the last note.

Keri Alkema, our Charlotte, also has a large voice, possessed of every color of the rainbow. Her dark, rich, heavy singing made it very clear why a man would devote his life to her, without hope. I found her diction immaculate. I could understand every word she sang.

Director Jay Lesenger has created a *mise en scene* which is dramatically believable and involving, from first to last.

The supporting roles also demonstrated splendid singing. Ava Pine sang purely and movingly as Sophie, the heroine's younger sister.

Jeffrey Madison's Albert was cleanly and powerfully sung, to the point

that we could easily see why the heroine would choose such a rock, even over the poet's passions.

Gregory Zavracky and David Crawford were very funny, and sang clearly and strongly as the drinking buddies.

Conductor Joseph Colaneri presided over a responsive, taut and powerful orchestra, whose sound embraced all the emotions on the stage, while never entertaining into a rivalry with the singers. They made us care about every character.

Peter Harrison's set was simple, yet caught our attention and used all of Norton Hall's small stage to full value. Only a long and noisy change between the crucial third and fourth scenes was less than flawless.

Christopher Ostrom's lighting and Nancy Leary's costumes were beautiful and sensitive companions to the cast's acting.

This is relatively unfamiliar music, but it's beautiful, richly melodic and eloquent, and it couldn't be better performed.