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Walker conducts his first Vanessa

By Karyl Charna Lynn

I usually write about Antony Walker conducting the Washington Concert Opera, of which he is the artistic director, and which occupies around a quarter of his year.

The rest of the time finds him guest conducting at various opera houses and concert halls around the world. I caught up with him this summer at Chautauqua Opera in upstate New York where he lead a stage production of Samuel Barber's psychologically haunting opera, *Vanessa*.

Chautauqua Opera is somewhat different than most opera companies in the USA. It is an integral part of the Chautauqua Institution, which was founded in 1874 as the Chautauqua Lake Sunday School Assembly, to educate Sunday School teachers during their summer vacations. Based on Protestant teaching, the program was so successful that it was broadened to include music, theatre, dance and academic subjects, along with the religious teachings. The first operas presented *Der Ring des Nibelungen* were in 1891. By the end of the 1920s, the Institution boasted an indoor theater, Norton Hall, a resident orchestra, the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra, and a permanent opera company, the Chautauqua Opera.

But what makes Chautauqua Opera unique is that

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the community can interact with the artists. Rehearsals are open to everyone, so opera attendees can follow the process of how the production is put together. They might also see the singers waiting in line at the post office, or be seated next to them in a restaurant. It is also one of the every few American opera companies that still performs all operas in English.

The company's philosophy is that of presenting "music theatre," to place equal emphasis on the music as on the drama. But what attracted Walker to *Vanessa* was the underlying harmonic complexity of Barber's score, which fused complicated melodies with "heart on your sleeve" music.

Vanessa explores human frailty and emotional neediness: what people require or expect to get through life and how they copy if it doesn't happen. It was Vanessa's desperate need to fulfill her fantasy of lost love that drove her to wait 20 years in total isolation from the outside world for her lover, Anatol, to return, only to find out that he had died and it was his son, also named Anatol, who visited. She fell in love with the son, despite their age difference and they were eventually engaged. Her niece, Erika, who lived with her, found herself pregnant by Anatol, but refused his offer of marriage, sacrificing everything for her

aunt's happiness. As the opera ended, it was now Erika's turn to wait. Director Jay Lesenger skillfully captured the numerous psychological undercurrents of the piece in a Musiktheater-type production.

Barber loved the human voice and orchestrated for it with exquisite music. Although the orchestra pit seated only 38 musicians that necessitated the use of a reduced score, Walker was able to draw a large, full orchestral sound and capture the score's complexities.

Brenda Harris was an ideal Vanessa, making her character come alive both dramatically and emotionally, and capturing the varying mental states. She transformed her character and voice from a cool, aloof aristocrat to the young girl in love, 20 years earlier. Keri Alkema's voice burned with Erika's anguish and emotional conflicts, effectively conveying her inner struggles, especially during the aria when she turned down Anatol's proposal of marriage.

Frédéric Antoun captured Anatol's superficial and opportunistic character, with fine singing and acting, and William Stone effectively imparted the loneliness and loss that the Old Doctor felt, perhaps symbolizing the justification for Vanessa's decision to delude herself into accepting her lover's son as a substitute for her deceased lover.

- Karyl Charna Lynn