

# The Post Journal

## Jamestown, NY

Friday, August 4, 2006

### Rarely Performed 'Vanessa' On Stage At Chautauqua

By Robert W. Plyler

CHAUTAUQUA – Nature was unkind to the Chautauqua Opera Company on Wednesday evening.

The company was performing Samuel Barber's opera *Vanessa*, which is set in northern Europe during a brutal blizzard, while a hot, miserably humid night bathed cast and audience in perspiration.

The opera is a rarely performed work which won the Pulitzer Prize when it was written back in the 1950s. Like the plays of Tennessee Williams, the libretto by Gian Carlo Menotti leaves one wondering whether it wouldn't like to go a couple of steps further than it does.

Both libretto and score are richly romantic, dark and full of subtleties. It doesn't have the thrilling melodies of Puccini nor the perfect shape of Mozart, but the music is beautiful. If you're worried about some of the horrors of early 20<sup>th</sup> century music, you won't encounter those at all.

Director Jay Lesenger has placed a real vote of trust in the Chautauqua audience which isn't as eager for new and adventurous programming as they often say they are. The result is very good, although it isn't a performance which will pull in a reluctant heart. The knowledgeable in music are the ones who will recognize its quality.

### IN REVIEW

The plot concerns three women, who live alone on a wealthy estate in an unnamed, Northern European country. Vanessa is a woman in her 40s, who moved to the estate in 1905 to await the return of her lover Anatol. Since he hasn't come, she has covered the mirrors and the pictures, and continues to live in the past.

Living with her are her mother, the elderly Baroness, who stares icily into the distance and refuses to speak to Vanessa. Also, there is Erika, Vanessa's niece, who is approximately 20 years old.

When the curtain rises, word has been received that Anatol is finally coming, despite the fact that a raging snowstorm is in progress. And come he does, although in fact it is the son of the former lover. He has heard so much about the wonders of Vanessa that when his father died, he has set off to see her for himself.

Naturally both Vanessa and Erika will be charmed by the handsome young man, and a triangle of both lovers and years ensues.

Brenda Harris was splendid as Vanessa. The part demands a soprano, and yet one who can do most of her singing in a rich, low tone, like a mezzo. It was a performance to remember.

Frederic Antoun was handsome as the young Anatol, and he had a fine lyrics tenor

which could scale the heights when necessary. He did have an uncomfortable chemistry with both women which strained the story a bit.

Keri Alkema was fine as Erika, although her climactic scene was badly staged. She is brought into her bedroom, having fallen on the path to the lake, and placed on a bed, where she sings her character's views of the central conflict, but she is so far upstage left, much of the audience cannot see her, and it's almost impossible to make out her words.

It was wonderful to welcome William Stone back to Chautauqua, and his performance as the family doctor was most enjoyable.

The Chautauqua Opera Orchestra worked hard at the demanding score, and conductor Antony Walker had clear ideas of what he wanted from them and even the audience could see those ideas being communicated. Despite this, attacks were sometimes ragged, although how people could play in an enclosed pit in all that heat and moisture is anyone's guess.

*Vanessa* was reviewed in dress rehearsal, at the company's request. It will be performed today and Monday at 7:30 p.m. in Norton Hall, on the grounds of the Chautauqua Institution.