

The New Criterion

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Bard/Tanglewood report

by James Panero

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New Criterion music critic Patrick J. Smith writes in with two reviews from farther afield:

The Bard Festival, located on the campus of Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, concentrates each August on one composer and his world. This year the composer was Leos Janacek, and the Festival led off with his early (1904) opera OSUD (Fate), performed in the new Frank Gehry-designed Richard B. Fisher Center (I saw it August 1). The piece is a youthful work about the obsession of love intermixed with artistic creation, and it clearly shows the struggles of the composer Janacek with mastering the operatic form (which he mastered triumphantly in his next work, *Jenufa*). JoAnne Akalaitis, the director, made some sense of the lumpish plot by treating it choreographically and

gesturally, and by filling the stage with people; Leon Botstein, the conductor, kept the performance moving forward for its eighty-minute length, though the accumulated weight of the monologues of the composer (sung by Michael Hendrick) and his inamorata (sung by Christine Abraham) threatened to sink the enterprise.

The bulk of the Festival lay in the two weeks of chamber music and orchestral concerts, and the discussion panels, of which I heard one day's worth (August 9). The chamber music performances (in Olin Hall) are usually the most successful: here, the impassioned playing of the Claremont Trio enlivened the lovely G-minor piano trio of Smetana, while the Bard Festival Chorale gave strong performances of some Janacek pieces. The evening concert, with Botstein leading the American Symphony Orchestra, was again in the Fisher Center (one of Gehry's less-inspired creations) and included pieces by Janacek, Smetana, Fibich, and Dvorak. The acoustics of the 900-seat hall are

excellent for opera and, I would assume, for chamber music, but the full orchestra at full volume produces a very loud aural presence (minuscule, of course, by rock standards) that, though warm in ambiance, overwhelms the listener, especially given Botstein's unsubtle readings. And something must be done about the feeble electric organ. Next year: Shostakovich, which should guarantee noise and fireworks on various levels.

The two one-act operas presented by the Tanglewood Music Center in the under-used Theater on the grounds centered on love and death--surefire operatic material. The two world premieres (I saw them August 10) included a new work (*Ainadamar*--Fountain of Tears) by the much-acclaimed Osvaldo Golijov, to the libretto by the playwright David Henry Hwang. The subject matter was, broadly, Federico Garcia Lorca, a

play of his (*Mariana Pineda*), and the woman who believed in him and it (Margarita Xirgu), but the work is in fact a long threnody on Lorca, his execution by the Falangists and his resurrection through the person of Margarita. At the end, however, the specificity of subject is broadened by the librettist to encompass a hymn to personal liberty, in somewhat of the *Fidelio* mode, with Lorca triumphing over the squalidness of his end. This ending, which goes on for inordinate length, sacrifices most of the emotional punch of the earlier scenes, and was not helped by director Chay Yew's inability to enliven it with meaningful stage movement..

The work's strengths, however, lie not in the story as much as in Golijov's music, here exploring the Spanish musical idiom with a thoroughness that, in his earlier *Saint Mark Passion*, he explored Caribbean and South American musics. His craft and sense of theater and

orchestration are fully mature, and it is the music that validates the rather lame words of the libretto--given magisterial shape by Golijov's house conductor, Robert Spano.

I would have preferred a more dusky, Spanish-soprano sound than the pure liquidity of Dawn Upshaw as Margarita; Amanda Forsythe made a lovely-sounding young Margarita. Golijov chose to portray Lorca vocally a la Cherubino: it was almost perfectly cast in Kelley O'Connor's slim figure and voice.

The opening opera, *Rage d'Amour*, by the Dutch composer Robert Zuidam, was a dreary affair, another shy at the Juana la Loca theme beloved of opera composers, and better set by Gian Carlo Menotti. The work is librettistically and musically static (Zuidam wrote both), with glutinous outbursts from the orchestra

punctuating the difficult tessitura of three Juanas (principally Lucy Shelton) and her obsession-lover-husband Philip the Fair (Eric Shaw). Stefan Asbury conducted.

James Panero is the Executive Editor of *The New Criterion*.