

# OPERA NEWS

---

**In Review** (<http://www.operanews.org/operanews/templates/review.aspx?date=8/1/2019>) > North America  
**August 2019 — Vol. 84, No. 2** ([http://www.operanews.org/Opera\\_News\\_Magazine/2019/8/August\\_2019.html](http://www.operanews.org/Opera_News_Magazine/2019/8/August_2019.html))

## *Owen Wingrave*

### **BROOKLYN**

### **Little Opera Theatre of NY**

**5/9/19**

**O**N MAY 9, Little Opera Theatre of NY offered what was billed as the New York premiere of Benjamin Britten's *Owen Wingrave* at GK Arts Center in Dumbo. The shadowy, haunting period production of this late Britten work was by the company's artistic director, Philip Shneidman. With a superbly prepared opening night cast led by conductor Richard Cordova, this *Owen Wingrave* argued for the musical merits of one of Britten's less frequently performed operas while exposing the dramaturgical weaknesses that justify its position on the periphery of the repertory.

As with *Turn of the Screw*, Britten and librettist Myfanwy Piper adapted *Owen Wingrave* from a ghost story by Henry James. But while *Turn of the Screw* remained a psychological thriller, *Owen Wingrave* the opera focuses less on the supernatural forces that cause the title character's death and more on the haunting of Wingrave's conscience. Owen Wingrave is a staunch pacifist, whose rejection of war and violence is at odds with his ancestors' legacies as fierce warriors and his family's expectations that he will follow in their footsteps. Piper's libretto puts the focus on this pull between integrity and duty, so that most of the opera feels like an argument for pacifism. Britten and Piper wrote the opera for BBC Television in 1970, during the height of the Vietnam War, and it's not difficult to see Britten's own pacifist views in the character of Owen Wingrave. The villains are not spectral but are Wingrave's love interest Kate, Kate's mother Mrs. Julian, his aunt Miss Wingrave, and his grandfather Sir Philip, whose relentless bullying and heartless disowning of Wingrave are more responsible for his death than his one night alone in a haunted bedroom. The opera ends abruptly, unsatisfactorily, without fully exploring the argument for pacifism. It is a shock, halfway through Act II, to learn that this opera is actually a ghost story and not a political dialogue.

Shneidman's attractive production, with evocative lighting and costumes by Josh Smith and Lara de Bruijn, respectively, stays faithful to the story as written, which is appreciated when mounting a work as infrequently produced as *Owen Wingrave*, but the production seemed reluctant to dive deep into issues of pacifism and violence, both in war and privately among families.

Robert Balonek was a heart-rending Owen Wingrave with a powerful and commanding baritone capable of tenderness and vulnerability. His most extreme foil was the ferociously sung Miss Wingrave of soprano Emily Pulley. Miss Wingrave is not a glamorous role, and Pulley extracted the drama from every hard-edged moment without sacrificing musicality or technique. As Kate, mezzo-soprano Katherine Pracht sang with voluptuous tone that made her mistreatment of Owen that much more shocking. Mary Ann Stewart sang Mrs. Julian with a clarion dramatic soprano, capable of both fragility and ice-cold cruelty. In contrast to Owen's implacable family were the warm portrayals of Coyle and Mrs. Coyle by bass Matthew Curran and soprano Janice Hall.

Conducting the New York premiere of *Owen Wingrave*, the versatile conductor Richard Cordova (he conducted the vastly different *Dinorah* by Giacomo Meyerbeer for Amore Opera less than two months ago) gave a secure, illuminating reading of Britten's difficult score. Even the most difficult and angular passages sounded mellifluous under Cordova's guidance. — *Steven Jude Tietjen*