

OPERA NEWS

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Piramo e Tisbe

NEW YORK CITY

Little Opera Theatre of NY & New Vintage Baroque

3/24/18

IN MARCH, the Little Opera Theatre of NY (LOTNY) in collaboration with New Vintage Baroque presented the New York City premiere of Johann Adolph Hasse's final opera, *Piramo e Tisbe* at Baruch Performing Arts Center. LOTNY artistic director and founder Philip Shneidman fashioned a simple, effective production elevated by the superlative musical performances of the opera's three principals guided by conductor Elliott Figg.

Written in 1768, during the twilight of Hasse's prolific career, *Piramo e Tisbe* is a surprisingly dramatic and theatrical work with an inventive and highly individual score. The entire opera, clocking in at just over ninety minutes, shares the same succinctness and verisimilitude found in the operas of Gluck. Arias and duets are mostly through-composed and threaded together with *accompagnato* recitatives that propel the action forward with barely a moment for the audience to catch its breath. From the moment the overture begins, the tragic fate of Piramo and Tisbe unfolds with inevitable momentum.

Shneidman's production updates Ovid's tale to the Middle East today (the program calls the setting "Persia, then and now), keeping the original setting of Babylon with the two lovers now caught in a modern blood oath. Costume designer Lara de Bruijn outfits Piramo and Tisbe like the teenagers they are in jeans, t-shirts and sneakers, accentuating their youthful optimism in the face of the harsh realities of their world. When Tisbe's father brings the man he has arranged for her to marry, Tisbe quickly covers her head with a scarf, a small, but powerful gesture showing how she is forced to navigate the worlds of adolescence and adulthood.

The opera calls for only three singing roles: Piramo, Tisbe, and Tisbe's father. The three artists singing on March 24 each gave indelible performances that should count among the finest and most complete interpretations heard in New York this season. Kristin Gorstein's portrayal of Piramo was masterful. She sang the difficult role with a truly flawless lyric mezzo, finding opportunities to show both the character's humor and heartbreak in a melismatic turn or with a glance. As Tisbe, Kelly Curtin sang with a crystal-clear soprano that was as round and full at the very bottom of her range as it was in some expertly

executed stratospheric embellishments. Both she and Gorstein surrendered themselves completely to the physicality of their roles. The final moment of the opera, however, belongs to Tisbe's father, who discovers the lifeless bodies of his daughter and Piramo. Tenor Brian Downen sang the father's final scene and aria with an intensity and focus that matched the high-level artistry of Curtin and Gorstein. His is a pleasant, light lyric tenor, but he used it wisely and effectively to portray the depth of the father's remorse and grief.

Figg conducted the New Vintage Baroque, a period instrument ensemble comprised of young, excellent musicians, with incredible attention to dramatic nuance and pacing, which made an excellent and irrefutable case for LOTNY's programming of this rare work by Hasse. — *Steven Jude Tietjen*

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