

On Jan. 28, we saw the world premiere of an opera commissioned by the Washington National Opera – "Democracy", music by Scott Wheeler, libretto by Romulus Linney, based on an 1879 novel by Henry Adams, grandson of Pres. John Q. Adams. It was an altogether pleasant experience, although strangely enough, the element I liked least was the music, which is the essence of an opera. Still, the story was so engaging and entertaining, the acting excellent and the singing very good, that on the whole the impression was positive. It's not that the music was stark raving modern, atonal, or with harsh harmonies – it just wasn't very melodic.

The story seems ripped from today's headlines – court hostility to religion, corruption in business, vote fraud, bribery in high places, and that perennial American entertainment, a president lying under oath. That's what really makes the work successful. A narrator character who introduces each character and gives some background does much to make the action easy to follow without having the characters sing their own back stories, as is the usual operatic convention.

Singing was very good, mostly by singers still in or just out of training. There were some truly terrific voices. The one minor disappointment was soprano Jessica Swink, whom we personally met and heard in her student days some years ago, and really liked to hear in smaller settings. Here, her voice, although beautiful, seemed a little light to adequately fill a large hall.

This is the second world premiere opera we saw - the first was Penderecki's "Paradise Lost" by Chicago's Lyric in 1978.

Here are pointers to the reviews:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A47835-2005Jan29.html>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/31/arts/music/31wash.html>

<http://www.culturevulture.net/Opera2/Democracy.htm>

<http://www.washtimes.com/entertainment/20050130-094529-7028r.htm>