

Metropolitan Opera, Nov. 2018

Nico Muhly: MARNIE

Arrigo Boito: MEPHISTOFELE

Nico Muhly's MARNIE was a great operatic experience. An engaging, suspenseful story, wonderful staging and acting, gorgeous singing, real character development – a true tour de force. The story is overshadowed by Alfred Hitchcock's movie of the same title, but this was a slightly different, though equally effective take.

Mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard was spectacular in the title role, in appearance, singing and acting. The development of her complex character was effectively portrayed both by the changing style of her singing and her costuming. She started in the high end of the mezzo range, singing in disjointed phrases with wide interval leaps; in the latter parts she sang more lyrically and dipped into a lower register. In the beginning, she was dressed in garish colors, expressing her brash self-assuredness in her assumed identities, but as her character mellowed, her clothes assumed more subdued earth tones. Costume changes were very frequent – more along the lines of cinema, rather than opera, where usually the heroine wears one or two costumes per act.



An effective element of staging was backing Marnie with four "shadow Marnies" who represented the many diverse identities she had assumed in her life of crime. This was most dramatic in the scene where Marnie visits a psychiatrist (at left) – each of the "shadows" took a turn with her on the analyst's couch, representing the various stories she fabricated for the doctor – as she had for her previous employers and her husband.

Baritone Christopher Maltman was in great voice as Marnie's husband Mark, who blackmails her into marrying him when he catches her stealing money from his company's safe. To me, he seemed the stereotypical operatic lover besotted with a less-than-deserving woman (see Carmen, Tannhauser, Traviata, Lulu), but at heart a

decent sort. Yes, the blackmail was evil, but then he does his best to protect her from the consequences of her crimes (unsuccessfully in the opera, inconclusively in the movie).

An unusual bit of casting was counter-tenor Iestyn Davies, with a vocal range approaching that of a woman, as a womanizer, Mark's brother, who makes a lurid pass at Marnie. But he sang very well, and the atypical casting worked within the drama. Another standout was mezzo Denyce Graves, one of my favorites, as Marnie's mother, though her role was secondary.

In the first act, I found the orchestration somewhat harsh and dissonant. But the vocal parts, especially ensembles, were great, with a spiky atonality that added piquancy to the dramatic events. That mellowed in the second act, which paralleled in musical terms the development of Marnie's character. Masterfully done.

The staging was effectively realistic, even though employing video and image projections as backdrops. There were many scene changes, performed smoothly and fluidly, and you knew immediately what the surroundings were: business office, the mother's tenement, Mark's mansion, ocean liner on their ill-fated honeymoon cruise. The only weak point was the staging of the climactic foxhunt, where Marnie's beloved horse is injured and has to be shot. The projection of galloping horses' legs behind Marnie singing at stage front just did not work. Nor did her red riding habit; in the novel and the movie, Marnie was terrified of the color red.

Time will tell whether this becomes a masterpiece that finds its way into the canon, but in any case, a very worthy addition to the contemporary operatic repertoire.

Arrigo Boito: MEPHISTOFELE



Boito should have stuck to his day job as librettist – most notably for Verdi (*Othello*, *Falstaff*) but also for Ponchielli (*La Gioconda*) and other composers. His one successful opera, based on Goethe's Faust legend, is an attempt at spectacle at a grand scale, and is usually staged as such, but the music is mostly bombast with little substance.

The Met's production, first mounted in Geneva in 1988, was certainly on a grand scale, and totally over the top. The visuals were spectacular, vast choruses were sonically impressive, if musically unsubstantial. The celestial choir was strangely costumed, in Venetian half-masks reminiscent of *Phantom of the Opera*, that made them look more ghoulish than angelic.

Solo parts were better. The standout was bass-baritone Christian Van Horn in the title role, who performed brilliantly. This is not as diabolical a role as the one in Gounod's *Faust*, but his vocal performance was superb. Great projection in the middle register, and a wonderful deep basso with great power. A worthy successor to Ghiaurov and Ramey who owned these devilish roles in the past.

Tenor Michael Fabiano as Faust was terrific, with a clear, unforced voice at all volumes and registers. Soprano Angela Meade sang beautifully as Margherite, but her obese figure detracted from the impression. I hate to succumb to "look-ism," but after seeing gorgeous-looking Isabel Leonard in the title role of *Marnie* two days ago, Meade just did not seem right for a romantic lead. Yes, opera is about suspension of disbelief, but it is a visual as well as a musical art, and what you see adds to or detracts from the overall effect. Soprano Jennifer Check did a wonderful job as Helen of Troy, although it is a minor part in only one act. She has a wonderful lower register – the part sounded as if written for mezzo.

So, perhaps it wasn't an overwhelmingly inspiring experience, but it was fun. Did I mention Boito should have stuck to his day job?