

We saw two one-acters at National Opera – Bartok's "Bluebeard's Castle" and Puccini's "Gianni Schichi". Both great experiences, each of a very different kind. Bartok's is a dark and gloomy retelling of the wife-murderer legend, sung in Hungarian. It is truly minimalist drama, with only two characters, Bluebeard and his latest bride Judith, sung by Samuel Ramey and Denyce Graves. The staging is minimal, and the work is often done in concert version. Here, there was some stagecraft that was totally superfluous (a spiral staircase to nowhere, a crashed chandelier reminiscent of a small-scale Phantom of the Opera) and some that was totally spectacular (sepulchral ghosts floating about in mid-air, and not done with projection).

Denyce Graves was just superb. A voice of great power and control, totally unforced and equally pleasant on the ear in all registers and at all volumes. And, wonder of wonders, long notes held purely, with virtually NO VIBRATO! Ramey, on the other hand, seemed out of his depth – he sounded tired, without the sonorous thunder of low tones that we have heard from him in the past. We heard him in "Billy Budd" just two years ago, and he was much better. Hard to believe that he deteriorated so much in such a short time. And today he sang with lots of vibrato, which is rather unusual for a male singer.

The music is very nice – early 20th C., but very tonal with just an edge of dissonance that fits the subject perfectly.

This production ends with Bluebeard strangling Judith – the WashPost reviewer claims that this is not how the libretto was written, but here it followed so logically from the preceding action and sung dialog that any other outcome seems inconceivable. I would be glad to hear from anyone who saw a staging that ends differently, or has a synopsis of the original libretto.

Puccini's "Gianni Schichi" was a revelation. I am constantly surprised at how operas that have small scale in performance time have huge scale musically – "Cavaleria Rusticana" and this one are cases in point, small dramas that have BIG music. It is Puccini's only comic opera, and has one of the most engaging and interesting stories of any opera in the repertoire, totally unlike Puccini's other fluff like Boheme, Butterfly or Rondine.

The signature aria, "O mio babbino caro", works much better in context. Heard alone, it seems cloyingly sweet, but onstage it is a welcome moment of tenderness and calm amid a swirl of comedic high-jinks and high-volume oom-pah that precede and follow it. The soprano, Amanda Squitieri, did a totally credible if not spectacular job of it, not playing up the pathos excessively. She is a graduate of Domingo's young artist training program, and has sung some major roles in student productions in DC, and will now heads for the big time in Italy.

The title role of the scheming rogue was played by none other than Samuel Ramey, who did much better here than before the intermission. At first I thought that perhaps it was because in the first act he was singing in a totally unintelligible language, and in the second act singing in words that I could make out, but then I recalled how wonderful Denyce Graves was in that same unintelligible language. No, I do believe that Ramey's days of heavy dramatic roles are over, but perhaps he can hold his own in lighter fare.

The music, although written at the same time as Bartok's, was very different – lushly romantic, more in the tradition of Verdi than Wagner or Schoenberg.

There were delicious references in Schichi to the previous act, in the form of stage effects representing spirits departing deceased persons and birds flying, recalling the flitting ghosts of Bluebeard's murdered wives. And an added epilog, spoken by Ramey in English at the end of Schichi, about how Dante exonerated Schichi (evidently the legend is based on an episode from the Divine Comedy) and asking for a verdict of NOT GUILTY for the character.

Review:

Pair of Aces - At the Kennedy Center, The WNO Triumphs Twice <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/17/AR2006091700785.html>