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Kentucky Opera's 'Werther' offers full satisfaction from the artistic fringe

By Andrew Adler
aadler@courier-journal.com

Kentucky Opera often comes up with offerings that make you grateful for the chance to revisit repertory that falls out of the mainstream. The company premiere of Massenet's "Werther" qualifies as just such a prime opportunity.

In the pantheon of opera — even within the sub-pantheon of French opera — "Werther" does not get the attention it deserves. Ask somebody to name a stage work by Massenet and you are apt to get "Manon" as an answer, or these days, maybe "Thaïs." (Thanks be to Renée Fleming.) "Werther," however, seldom rises to the top of anyone's list.

One obvious impediment is finding a tenor equal to the measure of Goethe's brooding title character. Here Kentucky Opera, which too often has settled for mediocre leading tenors, has a terrific Werther in the young American singer Garrett Sorenson.

Not only does he appreciate the particular vocal requirements of this role — rounding his phrases with a lustrous tone that rings right to the core — he suggests just the right degree of tragic vulnerability. By the time he reached Werther's defining Act Three aria, "Pourquoi me réveiller" last night at the Kentucky Center, Sorenson had shaped a theatrically credible portrait of a man undone by hopeless love.

His real-life wife, mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Batton, was every bit his equal in her Charlotte. The relationship between these two characters sometimes feels like a literary contrivance. Yet Batton avoided getting caught up in simpering, anti-idiomatic gestures. Her voice could be appropriately dark and dusky in its lower range, while also flirting with a sleek top that never ran out of necessary support.

"Werther" at its heart is an intimate, fastidiously constructed piece that finds its spectacle deep within individual characterizations. Stage director Kristine McIntyre allowed her singers necessary space, both physically and emotionally, no matter what the scene. Baritone Troy Cook, for example, was as cool and distant as Albert as Sorenson was a Werther frequently on the verge of boiling over. These two men — each utterly unyielding in his own fashion as they vied for Charlotte's love — created an ongoing tension that served the work admirably.

Elsewhere in this production, with spare scenic designs that originated with the Opera Company of Philadelphia, there were laudably strong contributions from supporting principals. Easily the finest of these was soprano Karen Vuong, who imbued her Sophie with marvelous articulation and a lilting, creamy tone.

Daniel Collins' Johann and Benjamin Robinson's Schmidt provided keen bits of comic relief, with Connor Angell capering nimbly as the Bailiff. A modest gaggle of children sang confidently.

Conductor Joseph Mechavich led the Louisville Orchestra with exceptional verve and style, drawing some of the best playing from this ensemble in the pit that I've heard in recent outings. All told, this "Werther" was a superb cap to Kentucky Opera's fall season — and a reminder that the fringes of the repertory can yield remarkable, mainstream satisfactions.

Reporter Andrew Adler can be reached at (502) 582-4668.

Additional Facts

OPERA REVIEW

'Werther'

Remaining performance: 2 p.m. today. Whitney Hall, Kentucky Center, Sixth and Main streets.
Tickets: \$40-\$140. (502) 584-7777.
