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OPERA REVIEW

‘Schoenberg in Hollywood’ Review: Grandiose Fantasy

In this world premiere of Tod Machover’s opera, a composer living in exile hopes to bring his music to the masses by scoring movies.

Jesse Darden as Irving Thalberg and Omar Ebrahim as Arnold Schoenberg in ‘Schoenberg in Hollywood’ PHOTO: LIZA VOLL PHOTOGRAPHY

By Heidi Waleson

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Boston

Tod Machover’s “Schoenberg in Hollywood,” given its world premiere by Boston Lyric Opera at the Emerson Paramount Center last week, is about an artist’s longing for relevance. The composer Arnold Schoenberg fled Hitler’s Germany and took refuge in Los Angeles in 1935, where he lived until his death in 1951. The real Schoenberg did have a meeting with the movie producer Irving Thalberg (brokered by, of all people, Harpo Marx); the project, a soundtrack for “The Good Earth,” quickly fizzled. However, in Simon Robson’s libretto (based on a scenario by Braham Murray, who died in July), the composer is tempted to bring his thorny, challenging music to millions through the

movies—and more. Reflecting on his unfinished opera "Moses und Aron," he wonders if those biblical brothers—Moses, the uncompromising prophet, and Aron, the salesman dedicated to giving the people what they want—could be metaphorically joined, and thereby save the world.

It's a grandiose fantasy, but so are the movies. In "Schoenberg in Hollywood" the fun is in the journey, even if the greater goal remains unrealized. Schoenberg, with the aid of two UCLA students, tries out his idea by imagining the events of his life as depicted in different film genres—silents, noir mysteries, Disney cartoons, musicals and westerns. Mr. Machover's ingeniously original music weaves those influences and others, like a Lutheran chorale for the hero's early conversion from Judaism to Christianity, together with sly quotes from Schoenberg's own scores—a bit of "Verklärte Nacht," a snippet of "Pierrot Lunaire."

The wit and dexterity with which this is accomplished makes the forbidding patriarch of musical modernism a genial, even playful figure who even jokes about his own unpopularity. One of the highlights, "The Schoenberg Follies: A Bad Revue," has Schoenberg, in song-and-dance mode, riffing on "Singin' in the Rain" ("I'm killin' tonal music") against the backdrop of some very angry reviews about his compositions.

The first section of the fantasy is the tightest: Schoenberg's struggles against the confines of tonality correspond with the strains in his first marriage, and the arc builds musically to the conflagration of World War I and his wife's death. Some scenes, like a Marx Brothers parody dealing with anti-Semitism, are overly talky; the poignancy of Schoenberg the refugee, even with the inclusion of the Shema Yisrael prayer as he reconverts to Judaism, has less impact than the earlier comedy. And Schoenberg's final revelation—a declaration of "Unity / Follow me"—is unclear. He rejected Thalberg's offer—what did he choose? Can an artist change the world? The opera doesn't say.

The performing forces were small but potent: Baritone Omar Ebrahim was a forceful presence as Schoenberg; tenor Jesse Darden and soprano Sara Womble were properly bright-voiced as his "new world" UCLA students, who nimbly played all the other roles; and David Angus crisply led the 15-member orchestra, with electronics woven in. The films by Peter Torpey, central to the opera's concept, ranged from silent movie title frames and stills of Schoenberg's accomplished amateur self-portraits to fuzzy footage of World War I aircraft, jittery home movies, and the saturated colors of American westerns. Simon Higlett designed the efficient set; Nancy Leary, the quick-change costumes. Director Karole Armitage's choreographic expertise showed in the dance-like movements of the characters, their interaction with the films, and the continuous flow of the 90-minute opera.

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal and is the author of “Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America” (Metropolitan).