

Music

Dallas Opera rescues a work from undeserved obscurity

By Anne Midgette, April 19, 2013



Susan Graham as Tina in The Dallas Operas production of *The Aspern Papers*. (Karen Almond, Dallas Opera/)

If new operas are a hard sell, recent but little-known ones are even harder. You have to persuade your audience to come hear an unfamiliar work, without the cachet of a world premiere to draw attention. As a result, even operas that do well at their premieres can sink like a stone afterward.

A case in point: In 1997, the *Washington Post* critic Joe McLellan cited three major works — John Corigliano’s “*The Ghosts of Versailles*,” Tobias Picker’s “*Emmeline*” and Dominick Argento’s “*The Aspern Papers*” — that were winning “a large and enthusiastic audience for American opera.” But, good as they were, the three have scarcely been performed.

Kudos, then, to the Dallas Opera for bringing back “*The Aspern Papers*” this month, in spite of financial duress. This year’s season shrank from five operas to three, and what usually happens in such cases is that the contemporary work is the first to go. (Even the Metropolitan Opera shelved plans for its revival of “*Ghosts of Versailles*” for financial reasons.)

But Dallas clung to its vision. On April 12, nearly 25 years after its world premiere, “*The Aspern Papers*” returned, and returned in a strong production with a first-rate cast. No cutting corners here.

Better yet, this revival proved that this opera deserves deluxe treatment. As we wring our hands about the challenges of finding new operas, this production proved a timely reminder that many fine pieces have already been written but aren't being heard.

“The Aspern Papers” is, first, beautiful. It opens with a gentle shimmer, like light on water, that swells to an aching lushness. The piece is a tribute to the golden age of bel canto: Argento, who wrote the libretto himself, recast the novella by Henry James so that Jeffrey Aspern is a composer instead of a writer. The result stands on its own merits, while remaining permeated with a sense of James's language and complex interpersonal interactions. Argento clearly had a lot of fun composing music for his title character's 1835 opera, “Medea,” although he evokes the 19th century rather than re-creating it.

This score offers music of nostalgia: lush outbursts from the orchestra; achingly beautiful, fragile vocal lines that duck away into obscurity; ensembles in which the voices are mere shadows of the orchestra's music; an offstage chorus's sustained quiet chords, shining like a glass harmonica.

Even when the soprano and tenor are locked in a gorgeous love duet, it's seen at a remove, set during one of the many flashbacks to 1835 from the opera's “present,” 50 years later. It is tinged with loss and pain, because the soprano, Juliana Borderau (sung in Dallas by Alexandra Deshorties) has just learned that her beloved Aspern (Joseph Kaiser) is cheating on her, although he doesn't know she knows, and sings on, oblivious.

The stage director, Tim Albery, and his production team found ways to express nostalgia visually. Stark lighting (Thomas Hase) spotlighted drab costumes (Constance Hoffman) in a barren, deserted room (Andrew Lieberman did the sets) for the 1885 parts of the story, with the 1835 sections set in softer, warmer tones. Past and present occupied the same space, the ghosts of the former sometimes coexisting with the denizens of the latter.

The casting was terrific. Anyone staging “The Aspern Papers” could theoretically change the balance of the piece by deciding where to put the emphases: on the soprano and tenor, the protagonists in 1835 or the baritone and mezzo, who are the central figures in the 1885 part of the story.

As Aspern, Kaiser sang with a soft, free sound, and Deshorties endowed Juliana with a thin, slightly neurotic racehorse nervousness that worked well both for the temperamental young woman of 1835 and the reclusive old lady she has become by 1885.

But Dallas put the real vocal weight to the baritone and mezzo — the Lodger, a critic-biographer obsessed with finding Aspern's lost papers, and Tina, Juliana's old-maid niece.

Nathan Gunn has effectively become the voice of American opera through his participation in so many new works, and although his robust and slightly monochromatic voice rings more with a Broadway-tinged spirit of good health than with anything approaching obsession, he is a reliable presence.

Susan Graham sang ravishingly, with a kind of matter-of-fact excellence, from gentle high pianissimos to an extended a capella duet with Gunn that was at once conversational and lyrical — and, remarkably, on pitch.