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***Galileo* from Philip Glass: Visually Arresting and Dramatically Cohesive**

July 23, 2013

 **United States Glass, *Galileo Galilei***: Soloists, Cincinnati Opera, Kelly Kuo (conductor), Ted Huffman (stage director), David A. Center (scenic design), Rebecca Senske (costume design), Thomas C. Hase (lighting design), James D. Geier (make-up and hair), Yara Travieso (movement). Cincinnati, Ohio, 19.7.2013 (RDA)



Galileo

Photo: Philip Groshung

Since *Einstein on the Beach* premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in 1976, composer Philip Glass has dedicated much of his time to writing both large-scale works and smaller chamber operas, many of them as prestigious commissions from major opera companies here and abroad. *Galileo Galilei* (2002)—with a libretto by the composer's frequent collaborators, Mary Zimmerman and Arnold Weinstein—premiered at Chicago's Goodman Theatre before playing in regional houses around the country. This is the Cincinnati premiere and, significantly, the first work by Phillip Glass ever to be presented by the company. The intermission-less, 90-minute *Galileo Galilei* is small in scale, devoid of the trappings usually associated with the larger genre. There are no

chorus, ballet sequences, large sets and mercifully, none of the grandstanding that usually passes for acting on many operatic stages—certainly not in this fine production directed by Ted Huffman and anchored by the excellent American tenor Richard Troxell as the aging title character.

The story in ten scenes—a portion of the life of the 17th-century Italian astronomer, philosopher and writer—is enacted by a cast of a dozen or so singers, most of them in multiple roles. The action begins late in the life of Galileo, now a blind, bitter, broken man confined to house arrest by the authorities for the crime of heresy. A former friendship with the high-ranking Cardinal Barberini—who would at all costs be Pope and who did become Pope Urban VIII—spared Galileo torture and death at the hands of the Inquisition, but not the punishment of silence and seclusion, after he was forced to recant his theory that the earth revolves around the sun and not the other way around.

As the story unfolds in a series of memory scenes, we learn of Galileo's relinquishing his daughter Maria Celeste (the lovely soprano Alexandra Schoeny) to life as a cloistered nun. We travel back in time to Galileo's youth—baritone Andrew Garland makes a compelling young Galileo—and to his encounters with Cardinal Barberini (the fine bass Nathan Stark), with various scientists, with ladies of the nobility, and with his young daughter during happier times. Rather than providing a sequential, chronological depiction of Galileo's memories, Glass and his librettists take us back and forth, in and out of the harrowing meetings with the Holy See during which the wily and loquacious Galileo manages to talk to the Inquisitors in circumlocutions and ambiguities, all the while insisting between-the-lines "Eppur si muove!" ("And still, it moves!")

The opera ends in an opera-inside-an-opera during which the myth of Orion—the hunter whose eyes are plucked out and later given back to him—is enacted by the full company to music redolent of that of Galileo's father, the Italian composer Vincenzo Galileo, founding member of the Cammerata that nurtured the creators of the first operas in the early 1600's. The final image of the old Galileo peering into the immensity of the heavens as if looking for an answer to life, death and the very meaning of man's existence in the universe is potent and moving.

Philip Glass's music and its transparent orchestration serve the story well. Glass knows how to write for the voice and reward the singer who doesn't flinch at the challenges presented by a high tessitura. The accompaniment never occludes the text, and for opera in English this is a boon. Glass shuns labels, especially the tired and overused "minimalist" one, which he dismisses, offering instead "classicist". Whether minimal or classic, the music in *Galileo Galilei* accompanies the story effectively, never wearing out its welcome.

The imaginative set (designed by David A. Center), the elegant costumes by Rebecca Senske, **the magical lighting by Thomas C. Hase (climaxing at the end in a stunning starry sky)** and the terrific make-up by James D. Geier all serve to enhance the work of director Ted Huffman, who collaborates with movement director Yara Travieso to make the proceedings visually arresting and dramatically cohesive. From the pit, Kelly Kuo assertively conducts the orchestral ensemble and the singers on stage. In addition to the artists already mentioned, magnificent support comes from the outstanding countertenor John Holiday and a versatile ensemble that includes Jose Rubio, Audrey Walstrom, Jonathan Stinson and Meghan Tarkington.

Cincinnati Opera continues its association with the Opera Department at the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music as co-incubators of new American operas in their joint program *Opera Fusion: New Works*, which thus far has included Douglas Cuomo's *Doubt*, Terence Blanchard's *Champion*, and Ricky Ian Gordon's powerful *Morning Star*. Surely the success of this local premiere bodes well for the future of contemporary opera in the Queen City; already announced for next year is a production of Kevin Puts's *Silent Night*.

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