

Cincinnati Post:

Opera's triple bill a major triumph

By Mary Ellyn Hutton
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Cincinnati Opera's triple bill Thursday night at Music Hall totaled triple bravas for soprano Catherine Malfitano. In a stunning display of stamina, vocal prowess and dramatic heft, Malfitano took on all three operas—Poulenc's "La Voix Humaine" ("The Human Voice"), Weill's "Seven Deadly Sins" and William Bolcom's "Medusa"—and seemed undiminished three hours later.

To say she was the star of the show is inaccurate. Malfitano was the show. She was the sole character in the Poulenc and Bolcom, and she sang (and danced) two roles in the Weill.

The evening was a triumph for Cincinnati Opera, too, with the debut of a new production by artistic director Nicholas Muni and the world stage premiere of "Medusa."

A woman's journey is the unifying theme of the three one-act operas. In the Poulenc, a woman faces the end of a love affair. In Weill's "Sins," she leaves home to seek her fortune in the big city. The Greek legend of "Medusa" is of a woman betrayed by the gods. The central element is a curving roadway, which in "Medusa" becomes a seascape.

The problem of having only one character onstage was solved by carving out a more intimate space. In addition to the black frame covering the proscenium arch—in place for all opera productions—there are black panels at the sides and a black wall in the back to draw the eye into the stage.

Musically, Poulenc's 1958 work is tedious. Basically, it consists of one side (hers) of a 40-minute phone conversation between The Woman and her former lover. Notes for the play on which it is based (Cocteau) specify that it should look like "a murder scene." Designer Dany Lyne has made it a crash scene. The Woman's car has hit a utility pole. A large rear-view mirror hangs over the stage with projections of the receding roadway and her lover's face. Lacking a phone cord to wind around her neck at the end, she walks up the road into oncoming headlights.

By contrast, Weill's "Sins" was an absolute delight. Anna I and II (practical and idealistic sides of the same person) does Memphis, Philadelphia and Los Angeles to raise money for her family's Louisiana homestead. A thinly veiled commentary on American capitalism (librettist Bertolt Brecht was a Marxist) it twists virtues such as love, courage and artistic integrity into "sins" that obstruct the goal of making money.

Weill's music is full of dance idioms—the foxtrot for "Wrath," for example .

Malfitano as Anna II joins a pair of male dancers in some skillful turns around the stage. Lucinda Childs' choreography is often "sinfully" suggestive. Anna's family, an all-male quartet, serves as a Greek chorus, commenting on Anna's progress. Malfitano underscored Weill's point at the end, turning ruefully to the audience as Anna returned to the home she has helped build, now replete with swimming pool and luxury car.

"Medusa" is a horror story with a heart and a snappy libretto by Arnold Weinstein. Malfitano was positively virtuosic here, alternating speech song and operatic vocalism with ease and conviction. A mesmerizing actress, she chronicled the journey of the vestal virgin raped by Neptune and disfigured by Athena with blazing intensity.

Thomas Hase's lighting is magical, sepulchral white for Medusa's petrifying gaze, a slash of white light across the back wall, then blood red as Perseus beheads her.

Bolcom's score (for string orchestra) brims with onomatopoeic color. Vividly rendered by conductor Brian Salesky and the Cincinnati Symphony, massed

strings hiss like snakes and Perseus' winged approach transpires in rustling, high-lying figures in the violins.
Repeat 8 p.m. Saturday, Music Hall. "Turandot" by Puccini repeats 8 p.m. tonight.