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MUSIC REVIEW

Dark Tale Told in an Atmospheric Tongue

'Jenufa' by Opera Slavica With Susan Marie Pierson

By ALLAN KOZINN
Published: September 2, 2012

Janacek's "Jenufa," which [Opera Slavica](#) presented in a wrenching performance on Thursday evening at the [Bohemian National Hall](#), has always struck me as a thoroughly wintry work. That may be because of its almost ceaseless grimness, or because its final act includes the discovery of a murdered baby, buried in ice. But then, much of the music that Opera Slavica specializes in — the Russian and Czech repertory — is set in dark, chilly landscapes. So a challenge that faces the company's young singers, along with bringing the music and characters to life, is evoking a suitably icy spirit for an audience that has just wandered in from the summer heat.



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times
Susan Marie Pierson on Thursday as Jenufa's stepmother.

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Ruth Fremson/The New York Times
Ashley Becker in the title role of "Jenufa" and George Ross Somerville as one of her suitors.

Opera Slavica is a hybrid [opera](#) troupe and training program, founded in 2009 by the conductor and pianist [William Hobbs](#) with the idea of schooling singers in the works that must be sung in Slavic languages. Each class spends a few months working on a specific opera and presents a staged production at the end of the summer.

Jenufa, based on Gabriela Preissova's novel "Her Stepdaughter," peers in on a tangled set of relations in a Moravian village. Two half brothers, Steva and Laca love Jenufa, who at the start of the opera is about to marry Steva and is pregnant with his child. When Steva and his friends turn up drunk at Jenufa's house, Kostelnicka, the girl's stepmother, forbids the marriage. She changes her mind after Jenufa's son is born, but by then Laca has complicated Jenufa's future by slashing her face.

After Steva rejects Jenufa because she is disfigured, and Laca bristles at the idea of raising Steva's child, Kostelnicka decides to salvage her stepdaughter's future by murdering the baby and telling Jenufa that the child died. The work offers redemption of sorts: Jenufa and Laca end up together (it's hard to tell how happily, given their overwrought dialogues), and everyone forgives everyone else.

But until the curtain falls, tension remains at peak levels, as much because of Janacek's scoring — sharp-edged harmonies, a wrenching balance of lyricism and angularity

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in the vocal lines, and driven, pointed orchestrations — as because of the narrative details. Even the reduced orchestration of Mr. Hobbs's arrangement for a 16-piece ensemble conveyed that energy fully. The production was directed by [Kara-Lynn Vaeni](#), with simple but imaginative sets by Nick Francone that used framed photographs to create a psychological backdrop rather than a sense of place. That quality was supplied by Liam O'Brien's colorful costumes, which suggested both the Moravian setting and a measure of class stratification.

Though the singers were mostly in the early stages of their careers, the first performance (the opera was repeated on Friday with a different cast) included an experienced guest, the soprano Susan Marie Pierson, as Kostelnicka. Ms. Pierson retired from the stage after an automobile accident in 2010 but sang here after another singer had dropped out of the production. Vocally she is in fine shape, and she did a superb job of conveying Kostelnicka's tightly wound personality and the desperation that drove her over the edge.

The other principals were generally well matched. Ashley Becker, the soprano who sang Jenufa, brought a lovely, fully supported sound and thoughtful, nuanced phrasing to the role. But, apparently following an understandable but unworkable directorial approach, she wandered through the set looking doe-eyed and lost. Similarly, Christian-Philippe Quilici as Steva, had the goods vocally — his tenor has an admirable clarity — but, except in the carousing scene in the first act, he seemed uncomfortable in his own skin.

George Ross Somerville, as Laca, stepped out of the lost-and-uncomfortable mode early on, offering a more animated portrayal. And the singers in the less consequential roles moved easily through the work, providing a cheerful counterpoint to the tragedy unfolding in the spotlight.

A version of this review appeared in print on September 3, 2012, on page C4 of the New York edition with the headline: Dark Tale Told in an Atmospheric Tongue.

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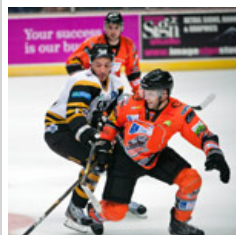
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