

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

SILENT NIGHT

BY KEVIN PUTS | FEBRUARY 21, 25, 27, MARCH 1, 2015

‘SILENT NIGHT,’ AT THE KAUFFMAN; THE BEST OF THE
COMBINED ARTS

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By Floyd Gingrich

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A heart-wrenching drama of the futility of war; it is powerful, musical, funny, and true.

Sat. night, Feb. 21, at the Kauffman Theatre in the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, was opening night for Kansas City Lyric Opera's production of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize winner for music, Kevin Puts' and Mark Campbell's opera, *Silent Night*. A better opening night cannot be imagined by mere humans.

The word opera comes from Latin, simply meaning a work. Wagner honored the genre as a combination of the best of singing, orchestral music, dancing, stagecraft, and drama. This opera, perhaps, did not include spectacular dance, although the battle scenes were masterfully choreographed (Doug Scholz-Carlson). *Silent Night* was convincingly the best of all elements.

Before discussing music, the entire spectrum of stagecraft (sets, scene-changing, lighting, projections, sound effects, stage direction) were the summit of the arts. A revolving, sloping, floor, visually supported by sandbags, had a church fragment at one point (reminiscent of the Alamo) a bunker and a shelter at the other 1/3 points serving as battle posts for the Scots, French, and Germans. To view the three encampments, these three accommodations were moved, usually clockwise by cast or costumed crew, as the center mesa was rotated in the opposite direction, with no break in action.

Screen material was draped behind all of this, and used for a very active set of animated projections of snow, clouds, letters home while they were read aloud on stage, and battle explosions. A front scrim was likewise utilized during specific scenes, particularly well at the beginning, with severe battle commencing to a blaring cacophony from the orchestra. The sets were borrowed from companies in Minnesota, Philadelphia, Cincinnati and Fort Worth; in its short life (2011) this opera has been produced nine times, and counting.

The story? On Christmas Eve, 1914, soldiers stopped fighting for a few hours to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of the King of Kings. The realization of that story in music and words is high drama, created by composer, Kevin Puts and librettist, Mark Campbell, based on the 2005 film, *Joyeux Noël*, directed by Christian Carion.

Conductor, David Abell and Director, Octavio Cardenas, led in the breathtaking realization of the production from the printed page. W. H. Auden reputedly claimed, "No good opera plot can be sensible. ... People do not sing when they are feeling sensible." This opus was the exception that proves the rule. Although beautifully sung, the senses-jarring story was preeminent to individual performances.

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Mr. Puts, quite logically, accompanied battle, confusion and argument with loud, dissonant, crashing music. Consonant harmony framed folk songs, Christmas music, and a simulated Mozartean duet at the Kronprinz's residence. The latter, as a light-hearted contrast to the deadly action a few miles away, was gut-wrenching in its inappropriate celebration.

Without writing an entire book, it is not possible to adequately praise the vocalists in this show, whether solo or ensemble. Some of the melodies were simple folk songs, in one case, accompanied by bagpipes (Jim Higgins). Others were angular, atonal, beastly difficult, and contrapuntal, at that.

Liam Bonner's (French Lt. Audebert) beautiful song, regretting losing his wallet on the battlefield, containing his wife's photo, expresses a simple, isolated, very human sentiment, multiplied in a thousand different ways from warriors defending their various fatherlands, all over the world. Sean Panikkar played the German, Nikolaus Sprink, an established operatic singer, drafted, and then ordered to the Kronprinz's Christmas party to entertain, as it happens, with his beloved, Anna Sørensen (Erin Wall) who arranged this performance in order to see Sprink.

Sprink can scarcely get through the performance, thinking of his comrades in harm's way, but they do pull off a Mozart-like duet. Much to Anna's dismay, he declines a tryst that evening, urgent as he is to return to his company. She announces her possession of a pass from the Kronprinz and that she will go to the battlefield with him.

They arrive just in time for Sprink to begin a song at camp, only to be joined by a piper from the Scotch camp. The Christmas Eve truce occurs and Anna sings a (newly composed) a capella setting of *Dona Nobis Pacem* (the last phrase of the "Lamb of God" section of the Latin Mass, "Give us peace") not a dry eye in the house.

With dozens of dramatic, and even comedic, bits, and great singing in every part, the only way to take it all in, particularly the demoralizing conclusion, is to attend one of the remaining performances, Feb. 25 and 27 at 7:30 PM, and Sunday afternoon at 2:00 PM. Let not a seat be empty.