

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

SILENT NIGHT

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

LYRIC OPERA'S 'SILENT NIGHT' A BEAUTIFUL, HORRIFIC MASTERPIECE

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By Libby Hanssen

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From living nightmare to waking dream, the opera "Silent Night" is a powerful account of World War I's 1914 Christmas Eve Truce.

Created by composer Kevin Puts and librettist Mark Campbell, it is a fictionalized distillation of events, inspired by the film "Joyeux Noel." But it is its own masterpiece, both beautiful and horrific, tracing the characters' tortured psyches within the three gathered armies (Scottish, German and French), their un-sanctioned ceasefire an overwhelming display of humanity.

The opera was co-commissioned by the Minnesota Opera, premiered in 2011, and won the Pulitzer Prize in 2012. The Lyric Opera's production, one of its finest performances in recent memory, premiered Saturday in Kauffman Theatre, directed by Octavio Cardenas.

This was Puts' first opera, and he teamed with veteran wordsmith Campbell to create a well-crafted work with a seamless quality of inevitability. The libretto was written in five languages: English, German, French, Latin and Italian. This blend of text shifted easily as emotions peaked and released with judiciously placed levity. As the truce approached, though, tension crescendoed in a nasty descending smear in the orchestra that left one breathless.

With an ash-gray backdrop of barren trees, trenches surrounded a bomb-battered belfry and crucifix that overlook piled sandbags representing no-man's-land. This central focus rotated to reveal each entrenched camp, using the original set design from Francis O'Connor, enhanced by Marcus Dillard's lighting and Andrzej Goulding's projections.

Conductor David Charles Abell led the Kansas City Symphony in the relentless, varied score. It incorporated original material reminiscent of Scottish ballads, festive carols, Mozartian arias, 19th century art song, with explosive sound design from C. Andrew Mayer and sound effects like shrill piccolo bomb shrieks or terrifying blasts from the brass. Simple melodies transitioned into moments of stark beauty.

The huge, exemplary cast wholly inhabited this performance. A male chorus constituted the armies, characters differentiated by subtle, distinctive touches in Kärin Kopischke's costumes.

Central to the drama were the three lieutenants, played with sympathetic urgency by baritones Craig Irvin and Liam Bonner (who originated their roles as Horstmayer and Audebert) and bass-baritone Craig Colclough (Gordon). Andrew Wilkowske (also of the original cast) was the endearing French barber/aide Ponchel in a gratifying role. David Blalock gave a gut-wrenching performance as Jonathan. Sean Panniker played the disenchanting, defiant opera tenor Nikolaus Sprink with soprano Erin Wall as his determined lover Anna, sung with assurance and clarity.

The work ended with a lingering whisper, the light fading gray, the dream vanished.

