

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

SILENT NIGHT

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POWERFUL HISTORY AND PERFORMANCES IN PULITZER OPERA

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By Sarah Tyrrell



Silent Night is new music—fresh yet accessible.

Contemporary opera is not for everyone, though: many long for the tried and true, where showpiece arias stand out against less memorable dialogue and the occasional choral number for diversion. That formula makes sense to opera-goers, in spite of all that is admittedly wrong with it. But exposure to the new is what sharpens the ears toward an awareness of artistic trends, which then helps a listener better understand the modern in music. *Silent Night* is an ideal vehicle for venturing into that “modern” without losing touch entirely with one’s comfort zone.

Across two acts and ten scenes, the opera explores what commonly divides the human race; ethnicity, borders, language, and even gender differences come front and center, knitted intricately to universal dualities of love versus hate, camaraderie versus isolation. What remains remarkably consistent is the singularity of experience that these characters face: the Scots, the Germans, and the French all navigate fear, regret, and desperation, while still holding tightly to hope. Some of the most beautiful moments—where the audience is most in touch with its own humanity—come when the English, German, and French texts intertwine. One man translates for another in an effort to interpret a simple conversation, which actually reflects their loftier goal: these men sought mutual ground on life’s ultimate issues.

In place of conventional operatic discourse came effective conversational recitative, some richly accompanied, some with meager instrumental participation, all of it with a signature momentum via Puts’ bright and varied orchestral color and harmonic motion. In that instrumental continuum lies the opera’s cohesiveness, as musical recurrences bind one dramatic moment to the next and form representational ties across sections. Puts explores a rich array of textures (the fugal passages that shadow the Christmas tree delivery were brilliantly composed and executed), harmonic devices, and motivic formulae, but he never abandons tonality. Throughout, though, the music challenged the audience with biting dissonance, complex counterpoint, and shifting meters.

The burial scene showcased the orchestra (led expertly by conductor David Charles Abell) and how well prepared the players were for opening night. The men carried bodies to a final resting place, and accompanying their labored movements were screeching dissonances built into an ominous march. Throughout, Puts also contrasted competing regions’ musical traditions (featuring bagpipes to distinguish the Scottish regime, for example), borrowing local color to further support characterization and dramatic intent.

A deep and versatile cast of singers was required to realize the opera. Liam Bonner’s Audebert is a restrained and disciplined Frenchman, but there is remarkable color and carrying power in his baritone. When sitting down post-battle to inventory the missing, wounded, and dead, Bonner is at his best. His list of soldiers’ names alternated with sad, simple statements about having lost a picture of his wife, Madeleine, and Puts set the text with dark lyricism and a steady ostinato. It’s almost as if Audebert equates the loss of life among his troops with the loss of that tangible keepsake. This makes clear that war-time experience is relative to each man’s personal suffering.

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As Sprink, Sean Panikkar was unforgettable, embodying both a stoic soldier and desperate lover while demonstrating a real depth of acting ability. Clearly comfortable with the vocal demands of Puts' writing, Panikkar dealt well with being vocally exposed, particularly when rejecting Anna's pleas in "Ich kann nicht." Sprink delivers a heart-stopping effect in the palace scene duet when he sings in bold but plaintive counterpoint with an austere trumpet solo. Later, the finality of one single lyrical utterance ("This is our only choice") could have carried the entire opera in its perfection.

Erin Wall (Anna) sang effortlessly, with a luminous clarity across an astounding range. In the same palace scene, as she and Sprink reminisced about their first meeting, Wall proved an animated, flexible actress, first angry, then tender, demonstrating that her character was indeed a strong female presence—on a stage and in a story populated mostly by men. Her "Anywhere, anytime" was a vocal and dramatic tour de force, while the "Dona nobis pacem" prayer during mass called for a jagged melodic contour and relentless repetition—repetition that was almost painful to endure, as was likely Puts' intent.

The opera also features a surprising lighter side, likely because it is absolutely impossible to dissect humanity in the way that a war narrative must without finding some humor. As Ponchel, Andrew Wilkowskewas a sympathetic character, engaging frequently with Audebert in intimate conversation that revealed his character as a spirited life force, there to parlay tempered comic relief. Craig Colclough as the Scottish Lieutenant Gordon was an understated but potent presence throughout, while Daniel Belcher (Father Palmer) was his usual remarkable self. Belcher's voice and stance transfixed the audience during the simple Prayer of St. Francis petition, which emerged in perfect balance over a dissonant orchestral web.

Craig Irvin as Lieutenant Horstmayer was brilliant in the confrontational exchanges he had with Sprink, handling well some beastly recitative passages, and David Blalock (Jonathan Dale) conveyed the role of the soldier who cracks. The audience positively cringed as he wrote a letter home, on behalf of himself and his dead brother, never mentioning the fate that has already befallen William (Caleb Ashby), the younger sibling he convinced to join the war effort with him.

Samantha Gossard had only a fleeting role as Audebert's pregnant wife, Madeleine. Still, her dramatic and vocal command in trying to convince her husband to keep his distance from this war positioned her as another strong female in the story. The chorus, whether enjoying the wares of respective troops' homeland (the Scots received whiskey, the Germans sausages), was well prepared to maintain what was a constant presence. The "Sleep Chorus" was emotive and believable, and this contained number is surely already famous for its poignancy and power. This ensemble cemented almost every turning point in the story: as the men bartered, shared, and lamented, their group effort reminded the audience of the impact war wages on the masses. The letter-writing scene near the end of the opera delivered a summary of interactions and revelations that the men had shared in their short time together on the battlefield, and these singers delivered beautifully the sporadic one-liners that drifted across a polyphonic texture.

Go to this opera to marvel at the logistical brilliance of the sets. Without the artistic and mechanical vision behind the stage setting, it seems that the opera would not be possible at all. Scenes and props shift in and out of the shadows, moving seamlessly from battlefield to bunker to palace, with very few glitches in the mechanics of it all. In order to initiate and maintain the continuous dramatic momentum that Puts and Campbell called for, much has to happen almost at once, so more deliberate set changes or obvious switching out of visual elements would have jeopardized fluidity. The arts of sound, lighting, and projection combined for vivid enhancements to that physical setting. Shadow effects (Marcus Dilliard, lighting) took night into day and back again; images of that legendary soccer game cast behind the stage in projection (Andrzej Goulding, designer), and a locomotive (aurally convincing thanks to sound designer C. Andrew Mayer) indicated the transfer of troops to a new front line position. The orchestral sounds further reinforced that the soldiers' fate was likely sealed with this new assignment.

While I would never turn my back on *Don Giovanni* or *Carmen*, it is exciting when the Lyric offers a new work for consideration. This kind of programming can help gain the company the attention it deserves and provide the momentum needed to reach a higher purpose: exposure and education about both the old and the new. Like other musicians in attendance, I presume, I am eager to study Puts' score, to investigate method and theory, to grasp more firmly just how he derived specific musical and dramatic outcomes that made up the staged rendering. And, of course all good art deserves a second "reading," and that opportunity cannot come soon enough.