

Theater Jones - Such Sweet Sorrow

If Gounod's saccharine take on *Romeo and Juliet* is the east, then Dallas Opera's production is the sun.

by Gregory Sullivan Isaacs

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Romeo and Juliet

by Charles Gounod

presented by [Dallas Opera](#)

Unfortunately, I am just shy of 150 years too late to complain about Gounod's take on Shakespeare's tragic love story, *Romeo and Juliet*, which opened Friday in an excellent production by the **Dallas Opera**. Divorced from the Bard's lilting iambic pentameter and shorn of his magical use of language, the story reverts to a creaky plot about a family grudge combined with willful tweens driven to disaster by raging hormones and parental rebellion.

In some ways, Prokofiev's ballet works better because language is completely removed. Hearing the dated French libretto, by Jules Barber and Michael Carré, while seeing the English subtitles that tried to shoehorn in, where possible, Shakespeare's original words, makes us all the more homesick for the original.

Director [Michael Kahn](#), a Shakespeare authority, does his best to overcome the deficiencies of the libretto. Gounod and his collaborators completely eliminated the final scene where the families recognize that their childish feuding has robbed them both of their beautiful children. Kahn cleverly restores this by staging the prologue as the funeral of the two dead lovers. While the prologue might make a stronger statement with the chorus alone, Kahn gives us Shakespeare's intended resolution with the families reconciling, albeit too late to save their pride and joys.

Unfortunately, there is nothing Khan can do to correct Gounod's most glaring error when he rewrites the ending to give the two lovers a final farewell duet. Shakespeare had it right. It is the height of the tragedy that they are denied this final moment of goodbye—just missing each other by moments. Oh well, it is opera after all. No one dies without singing for a long time first.

Kahn also paces his stage action to combine the best of theatrical traditions and opera's unique ability to stop the action and the progression of time. When things are happening in "real time" the stage is busy and populated with real people doing real things. However, when Gounod stops time while the characters musically reflect on what has occurred, such as the dramatic scene after the death of Tybalt, hardly anyone moves at all. Unfortunately, Kahn disturbs his own effect by having a couple of guys awkwardly carry out the two dead bodies. There is absolutely no discernable reason for this to happen since the curtain comes down just a few moments later. The tableau could have easily, and more effectively, remained in place.

The two protagonists, sung by soprano Lyubov Petrova and tenor Charles Castronovo, are as close to Shakespeare's intentions as you will get in opera. Do they look like

teenagers? No, but age-appropriate singers simply do not exist as they do for the stage or film actors, such as Zefferelli's 1968 film version.

Petrova and Castronovo are young and attractive with French opera-appropriate lyric voices. They are far cry from what we used to get in opera; such as a middle-aged and *spinto*-voiced production with a 54-year-old Placido Domingo and full-figured Ruth Ann Swenson spooning.

Even better than the physical aspects, both of the singers inhabit their characters in a convincing fashion. Petrova is the most consistent. From her first shy entrance to her petulance at being left alive and alone at the end, she is always believable. Vocally, she sings the role marvelously. If the very top notes seem to be slightly forced, it is a minor flaw at most.

Castronovo is quite dashing, both with his shirt on and with it off. His acting is also excellent and is only marred by his occasional use of "opera singer's gestures." These include the hand over the heart, the hand to the forehead, and looking like he is holding an invisible apple in front of his eyes while hitting a high note. Once he banishes these stock gestures, he will be truly wonderful in the role. Vocally, he is perfect. He has the ability to sing loudly without tipping over into pushing, and doesn't try to sound like he has a heavier voice. But his glory is a gorgeous soft voice that is perfectly focused and can easily float a note in any part of his range. The fact that he decided to completely ignore Gounod's dynamic markings and belt out the reflective aria *Ah, lève-toi soleil* as though it were Puccini, is regrettable. Of course, most tenors do, but why do what most tenors do if you are capable of doing otherwise? He missed a chance to enchant.

The rest of the cast was equally strong and looked like the characters they played. How novel for opera! Scottish bass Robert Lloyd is particularly effective as Friar Lawrence. Baritone Joshua Hopkins as Mercutio, baritone Stephen LaBrie as Paris and tenor Aaron Blake as Tybalt lead a group of realistically rowdy and high-spirited boys from both of the warring clans. Mezzo-soprano Jane Bunnell is terrific as Gertrude; bass Stephen Morscheck excellent as Capulet, Juliet's blustery father, who was just trying to do what he thought was right for his daughter. Mezzo-soprano Roxana Constantinescu is convincing in the pants role of the page Stephano.

The production, by Claude Girard, is reasonably Renaissance. Candace Evans choreographed the dance sequences with a light hand. The dancers actually look like real people dancing at a party. Bill Lengfelder brings his usual skill to the staging of the fight sequences.

This brings us to the conductor. Marco Zambelli, in his Dallas opera debut, turned in an impressive and musical reading of the score. The orchestra sounded wonderful. His tempi were dead on and he was always on top of the text; a rarity in opera conductors these days. Except for one brief moment, where Robert Lloyd got away from him, Zambelli was right with his singers every step of the way. His was a romantic reading but he resisted the layer of saccharine schmaltz that we usually get with Gounod. He let the orchestra loose in the big moments but, amazingly, he never once covered the singers. He may have come close, but the voices could always be heard. In the soft sections, he allowed the music to shimmer, as opposed to just getting quiet. Since he

was invisible from my seat, I cannot comment on his baton technique. However, no matter what he was doing, there was nothing to complain about in his results.

In the end, he gets my ultimate compliment: Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet* is a much better score than I remember it ever being. **TJ**