

OPERA NEWS

In Review (<http://www.operanews.org/operanews/templates/review.aspx?date=8/1/2017>) > North America

Afterword, an opera

OJAI, CA

Ojai Music Festival

6/9/17

GEORGE LEWIS'S *AFTERWORD*, an opera, received its West Coast premiere at this year's Ojai Music Festival (seen June 9). One indelible mark the occasion left upon my memory was respect for the power of the singing human voice. The open-air stage in the Libbey Bowl requires that singers be miked. This was hardly necessary, given the size and beauty of the voices singing Lewis's score, but the electronic amplification gave them almost a supernal stature. Gwendolyn Brown has a voice like the Earth itself, immense with a deep rumbling contralto but with an extended top that has a stratospheric, counter-tenor-like quality, so that she can embody an extraordinarily wide range of emotional and symbolic experience. In contrast, Joelle Lamarre's soprano has a glorious lyrical bloom that allows her to explore realms of the imagination that lie beyond the everyday. Tenor Julian Terrell Otis sang with richness and incisive articulation.

The generous, even magnanimous quality of these voices provided the ideal medium for Lewis's opera, which focuses not so much on the particularities of character and human experience, but more on the visionary spheres opened up to us by music. *Afterword, an opera* presents the growth of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) as the means by which experimental musicians, found inspiration and outlet for their prodigious musical gifts. It takes the form of what Lewis calls a *Bildungsoper*, in which the ideals of the AACM reach fruition in the lives of three figures, who serve as avatars for the enterprise. Therefore the sublime aspect of the voices is crucial to convey to the audience the radically spiritual nature of the music. Toward the end of the two-act opera, the transformative nature of the AACM, as articulated by the singers, became apparent in music of considerable power and penetration.

The journey toward this climactic moment was not always an easy one for the singers to maneuver. They related rather than represented their roles, serving as narrators more than actors. This fundamentally Brechtian concept of theater can work quite powerfully if all elements are there to give weight to the narration. Unfortunately they were not. The minimal resources of the Libbey Bowl stage allowed only for the sketchiest of direction by Sean Griffin. Under the baton of Steven Shick, Lewis's score was played with painstaking skill by the International Contemporary Ensemble but it did not chart the growth of the singers' life in music. The musical idiom seemed increasingly inappropriate as the opera progressed.

As the singers dwelt incessantly upon the need to write original music, both in the sense of going back to origins to find one's identity and of writing absolutely new music, the orchestral score did not seem to move

in either direction. In the style of European serialist modernism, *Afterword* explores the acoustic qualities of the instruments in ways that are subtle, eccentric and, at moments, highly entertaining, but it never tracks the artistic growth within the singing avatars. As the artists sing of developing their own music, one wishes one could actually hear their original voices in the orchestra. There are occasional fragments of jazz and hints of spirituals, but what we long for is a fully articulated presentation of how the music that came from the AACM sounded and how it asserted African-American identity. That moment never came, and as a result this interesting opera missed its mark. —*Simon Williams*