



Live PERFORMANCE reviews

The Classical Style: An Opera of Sorts

by MATTHEW HARRIS, Music by STEVEN STUCKY, Libretto by JEREMY DENK
New York Premiere: Zankel Hall, New York City, December 4, 2014

“Who’s Charles Rosen?”

That’s what the lady sitting next to me in Zankel Hall asked after glancing at the program for Steven Stucky’s *The Classical Style: An Opera (of Sorts)*. Rosen, author of the erudite book from which the opera derives its name, is a character in this work, as are Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Other characters include the chords Tonic, Dominant, Subdominant, a Tristan Chord cameo, a music student and a couple of professors. Talk about inside baseball!

“I wish they had warned us about this,” my neighbor said. She and her husband, and just about everyone else in attendance, were there as subscribers to a nice little chamber music series. I could feel the anxiety in the room as they wondered what they were in for. While the orchestra (The Knights) squeezed into place at the back of the little stage, I looked in vain for any new-music or opera people in the audience, then braced myself for the poor reception to come.

But once conductor Robert Spano deftly kicked things off and Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven began bantering away in Heaven, there was a communal sigh of relief, which quickly turned into howls of laughter and occasional applause. This work, for all its high-concept underpinnings, is a farce, which makes a comedy of triads not at all

intimidating. Indeed, the three triads are presented as a love triangle who meet up at a bar

The libretto, by pianist Jeremy Denk, makes a fine vehicle for Stucky’s compositional gifts. As for plot, there are actually three: one for the composers, one for the chords and one for the professors, though they interweave. The multiple protagonists, in touch with their inner Dangerfield, are each trying to get their proper respect. In the middle of all this stands Charles Rosen, the unmoved mover. His occasional but brilliant lines – straight out of his book – are a counterpoint to the pandemonium.

Stucky doesn’t try to sound like Mozart when Mozart sings or Haydn when Haydn sings. Instead, like Prokofiev in his *Classical Symphony*, Stucky creates a consistent sound that is his own voice while invoking the classical style. The vocal writing has an easy flow, and the word setting and orchestration are such that, even with the orchestra right behind the singers, I could hear every word. This composer has a nice instinct for pacing his material and excellent comic timing

Tenor Dominic Armstrong as Haydn and bass-baritone Ashaf Sewailam as Beethoven were standouts in a very talented cast, but soprano Jennifer Zetlan stole the show as a foppish Mozart with her bewitching voice and presence.

Spano held everything together beautifully and The Knights played with clarity and precision. On the first half of the program, Denk gave a rapturous performance of Mozart’s *Fantasy and Sonata in C Minor*.

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orchestra. But even minimal staging like this needs a set and costume designer. The cheap-looking clothing, wigs and props could have been pulled together the day of the performance. And not since that junior high school play about the founding fathers do I recall seeing someone on stage in old-fashioned garb sporting incongruous horn-rimmed glasses: Beethoven looked like Elvis Costello on a bad hair day.

Nevertheless, *The Classical Style*, in its New York premiere production, was a big success. There was a happy buzz as people left the theater, and I heard a few ask each other if the opera was coming back to New York any time soon. I hope so.