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## OPERA REVIEW: Middlemarch in Spring, a two-act opera by composer Alien Shearer, libretto by Claudia Stevens. First performance San Francisco, Z Space, 19 March 2015

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## OPERA REVIEW

***Middlemarch in Spring*, a two-act opera by composer Allen Shearer, libretto by Claudia Stevens. First performance San Francisco, Z Space, 19 March 2015.**

George Eliot consistently paid meticulous attention to matters of ‘voice’, typically providing precise descriptions of her characters’ voices, whether speaking or singing. Dorothea Brooke’s harp-like voice is, of course, one of the qualities that first transfixes Will Ladislav. Eliot’s novels also resound with allusions to the operatic repertoire, from Caterina Sarti’s impassioned renditions of Gluck in ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love Story’ through to the elaborate operatic analogies that characterize the social milieu of *Daniel Deronda*. Despite these deeply-threaded affinities with opera, this is the first operatic adaptation of *Middlemarch*.

Clearly any adaptation of *Middlemarch* is forced to be selective, and the economics of contemporary opera production make this a particularly stringent imperative. For her libretto, Claudia Stevens chose to limit her dramatization to the ‘Miss Brooke’ part of the novel, in order to achieve a coherent scope for a two-act opera. Stevens also provides newly-written text designed to articulate the inner lives of the opera’s characters. These consist of 6 primary roles: Dorothea and Celia (both sopranos), Mr Brooke (tenor), Ladislav (tenor), Sir James Chettam (baritone) and Casaubon (bass-baritone).

The musical element in operatic adaptations makes it possible to concentrate a potent response to literary texts within even the narrowest timescale. The action of ‘*Middlemarch in Spring*’ begins with Mr Casaubon teaching Dorothea Greek. Having established her thirst for learning, the libretto moves swiftly to Mr Brooke discoursing on the ‘lightness’ of the ‘feminine mind’. The opera exploits some of comments made specifically about female musical accomplishment in the novel, with a witty quote by the orchestra of ‘The Last Rose of Summer’ (the melody Dorothea is grateful Casaubon doesn’t pester her to play) to convey Brooke’s liking for a ‘good old English tune’; the presence of a piano in the orchestra nicely connects the contemporary operatic score with the nineteenth-century world of the novel. Chettam arrives with his unwelcome gift of a puppy, immediately adopted by Celia; full advantage is then taken of the theatrical potential of the two sisters’ inspection of their late mother’s jewels.

There is a ‘supporting cast’ of two servants who observe and occasionally participate in the action. These spend a great deal of their time gardening at the edge of the set – alternately shooed off or daubed with cigar ash by Mr Brooke. Their constant presence very economically conveys Dorothea’s sensitivities towards the poor and helps provide a ‘reading’ of the novel that speaks to the sensibilities of our own times and our desire that under-represented characters and classes should be made visible. This effect is amplified by the role of the orchestra which is on stage and thus part of the action – literally so at times, such as when members of the band play the crowd interjecting at Ladislav and Brooke’s political speeches. The political thrust of the novel is foregrounded in the libretto, culminating in a very enjoyable comic scene as Brooke and Ladislav prepare for the hustings in Act Two, whereafter Brooke’s speech is greeted with jeers and a volley of fruit.

Dorothea’s leading vocal and dramatic role means that she constantly voices thoughts that remain silent in the novel. Her desire for a differently-ordered society and a ‘useful life’ is pitted against Mr Brooke’s valorization of worldly compromise. Subsequently Ladislav declares that his ambition to enter parliament as a radical reformer is a direct response to

Dorothea's declared wish that 'life should be beautiful for everyone'. Thus the opera, both in its medium and message, embodies Eliot's joint concern in *Middlemarch* with matters of voice and of vocation.

As the title of the opera, *Middlemarch in Spring*, might suggest, this is not *Middlemarch* the novel – how could it be in a two-hour chamber opera – but a brief slice of the small-town English life represented in the novel; the phrase 'in spring' also suggests a sunnier and lighter outlook than that of the novel, as well as a new beginning. This is reflected in much of the music which has an attractive elegance and lightness but contains enough textural variety and harmonic toughness to convey some of the darker undercurrents of the novel. There is little suggestion that the opera is a *Merrie England* romp, and there are many effectively realized moments of conflict and thwarted passion despite the necessary loss of several of the major plotlines and characters of the novel. As in most operatic adaptation of fiction, events and characters are often combined, condensed and telescoped, with dialogue from one character being assigned to another, and new dialogue not in the novel being inserted, mainly for self-revelatory arias and ensembles.

Shearer's music is predominantly tonal, but there are several instances where the drama calls for more acerbic, sometimes dissonant, harmony allied to frequent innovative orchestration, all emerging out of the drama of the particular situation. Despite limited resources, the chamber orchestra consisting of flute, piccolo, clarinet, bassoon, French horn, percussion, piano and string quintet, provides a surprisingly wide palette of colours, interesting harmonies and textural variety. Shearer uses some pre-existing material as well – in addition to the snatch of 'The Last Rose of Summer' already mentioned, which occurs early in the work, the lilting Neapolitan song, 'Oî Marie', by Eduardo di Capua of 'O Sole Mio' fame, is the source for a delightful waltz as Edward and Dorothea visit Will's studio in Rome.

The opera apparently evolved from the early scene where sisters Celia and Dorothea share the jewels bequeathed to them by their mother, and this scene has a lightness but also nicely sets up the contrast between the very different personalities of two sisters; Celia has the upper soprano line and there are shades of Fiordiligi and Dorabella's several duets from Mozart's *Cosi fan tutte*.<sup>1</sup> However, their scenes take on added depth as the opera progresses and Dorothea's unhappiness becomes increasingly apparent. The two soprano parts are well contrasted vocally, with Celia's more flighty personality expressed through frequent melismas and high-lying soprano *coloratura*, while Dorothea's music is warmer and more lyrical, exploiting the soprano middle-register as much as its higher range.

Of course Celia as a character has much less depth than Dorothea, but she is presented with affection and humanity and is given a chance to reveal this in a second-act aria where her personality is musically explored. The aria, suggestive of her enjoyment of domesticity and a simple life, is underscored by the piano which is again evocative of nineteenth century drawing rooms. Yet we are fully aware that hers is a life of immense privilege surrounded by poverty: 'Home, hearth and babies, those are my domain', she sings. She simply does not register social issues in the same way as Dorothea: 'Leave the rest to men, they know what is best.' No proto-feminist she! The character is sung in the San Francisco Z Space (formerly Theatre Artaud) recording with bright, free-flowing tone and accurate *fioritura* (embellishment) by Tonia D'Amelio, while the seriousness and depth of Dorothea is effectively embodied by Sara Duchovnay, who brings vocal warmth and richness to a wide range of emotion.

Shearer, a singer himself, writes well for all his voices, seldom, as too many

contemporary composers are often inclined to do, keeping the voice in the upper register for sometimes spurious dramatic effect far too long. Some of the most expressive writing is for Will, an ardent tenor sung with charm and passion by Daniel Curran, who also has an extended aria in Act Two. Indeed, Shearer gives all his characters substantial arias of some kind, building on this long-standing and traditional operatic device, creating moments of sometimes piercing self-awareness and revelation. Will's vocal line is often demanding, but grateful to sing as well, suiting the frustration as well as passion of the character. A more two-dimensional and conservative character such as Sir James Chettam, a baritone role sung by Eugene Brancoveanu, gets an aria which creates a more rounded character despite his singing about how happiness results from everyone accepting the limits of their given station in life. While his views on the role of women in society – a not very subtle criticism of Dorothea – are, of course, highly conservative, the music is often warm and lyrical, allowing the baritone voice full flow, giving him more depth.

Edward Casaubon is a tricky character to create without turning him into a caricature. The music surrounding him consists predominantly of 'dry' orchestration – much evocative use of percussion – for many of his big moments in act one. His first aria sets out his view of life: 'My time is not my own, / Let others versify and peak and pine. I breathe a different air, / I answer to a higher calling.' This aria immediately and effectively suggests the arrogance and pedantry of the character. However, the strong vocal and physical presence of bass Philip Skinner, suggests depths of strength and passion. The rich timbre of Casaubon's voice, the first voice heard in the opera, establishes him as a persuasive channel of learning for Dorothea at the outset. Later, it gives real force both to his oppressive power as a husband – as conveyed in the opera's disturbingly effective dramatization of his exchanges with Dorothea – and to his anguish over the incompletions and dead-ends of his scholarly endeavours. This is one of the opera's striking interpretive angles.

While the subject matter of the opera is predominantly serious, the comedic potential of Mr Brooke's character is beautifully realized. In the scene already mentioned, Mr Brooke, tenor Michael Mendelsohn, gives a political speech, and is interrupted and heckled by the members of the small orchestra who form his on-stage audience. Alongside their vocal interjections, they provide a deliberately disjointed and witty musical accompaniment which evokes Brooke's ineptitude as a political speaker. As orchestra members finally chase him from the stage, hurling rotten fruit, one can think of many other instances in opera where an orchestra would have enjoyed a similar opportunity!

The opera's musical trajectory moves inevitably towards the final extended scene between Dorothea and Will, and it is here that some of the most expressive music occurs. Dorothea appears an almost Straussian heroine at times, with a noble sense of resignation and even renunciation. Her first act aria establishes her character and evokes the limitations that society places on her with a sense of her thwarted desires and ambitions: 'It remains the wish, the dream of a child that fades away in the cold light of day ... a child's desire set aside as a wife, who must watch and wait and honor and obey.' However, it is she who initiates the kiss that breaks Will's resolve to leave in their final scene, as she offers to renounce all her wealth to live with him: 'And I will learn what everything costs!'; 'We will live in the world', they sing in an ecstatic duet. This is such highly-engaging music that one longs for the duet to be even more extended.

However, this is a chamber opera, roughly two hours in length; it culminates with a

happy ending as all gather in a miniature Mozartian finale to sing in extended ensemble: ‘The world will have its way with us’, echoing Dorothea’s allusion to Wordsworth in the first scene: ‘a world too much with us, a world of getting and spending’. Musically, it is a traditional finale consisting of a slow *cantabile* first section, followed by a *stretta* (faster passage), much as one might find in a nineteenth-century Italian opera. All the characters sing, ‘but in spring the world tilts ... in spring we come alive’. It is briefly disconcerting that in this final ensemble, ‘in spring we come alive’, entails the revival of Casaubon from the dead – musically essential but dramatically perplexing none the less. For all the heart-clutching in previous scenes, Casaubon is by far the lustiest-looking member of the opera’s cast and now looks as though he might easily throw young Will out on his ear. Nevertheless, it is musically a most effective ending – brief, understated, but sustained by warm, lyrical music that suits the small-town atmosphere of the source.

‘Middlemarch in Spring’ convincingly evokes the season at which the novel’s action ends and the new beginnings symbolized by Will and Dorothea’s union and heralded in Will’s electioneering speech. Musically and dramatically, this is a moving and enjoyable adaptation which achieves a concentrated expression of more of Eliot’s novel than one might think possible in a brief two-act opera. It must be well-nigh impossible for a contemporary opera composer to be other than self-consciously intertextual, and listeners may expect to enjoy its passing moments of knowing post-modern pastiche of earlier opera and operatic conventions – but the opera develops its own musical idiom too. Composer and librettist have worked productively to produce a fine adaptation of *Middlemarch* which is also a work of originality and charm.

Performance runs of contemporary opera tend to be short and, once missed, the curious often have to make do with audio recordings and the reports of the lucky few who actually *saw* the opera to supplement their reading of the libretto and score. (This seems to be the case for Michael Berkeley and David Malouf’s two-act opera of *Jane Eyre* for example, premiered in 2000). Fortunately, the San Francisco performance of this *Middlemarch* opera is freely available on the internet, so that readers of the *George Eliot Review* may watch and listen for themselves [see: <https://vimeo.com/125807966> (Act I) and <https://vimeo.com/125479590> (Act II)]. A new Ash Lawn Opera production is also under preparation, using many of the same cast.

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Note

- 1 The librettist, Claudia Stevens describes how a concert scene for two sopranos and a tenor based on this incident in the novel provided the germ of the complete opera: Claudia Stevens, ‘A New Opera: *Middlemarch in Spring*’, *George Eliot – George Henry Lewes Studies*, 67: 2 (2015), 227-233 (230).