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'Magnum Opus': Song and Dance of Death

With Fringe you get a bit of everything -- even serious opera. Take Michael Oberhauser's [Magnum Opus](#), which freely updates the saga of 19th-century composer Robert Schumann, who died in a mental institution at age 46.

Oberhauser focuses on a modern Robert trying to write on his laptop amid the beer bottles and pizza-box-wreckage of his room. He's blocked, but a pair of timeless muses glide in to help -- or perhaps to drive... him... mad!

"Magnum Opus" isn't as melodramatic as all that, despite a plot that only roughs in its hairpin-turn jealousies and suspicions; you can't always believe it when these likable characters suddenly steer themselves toward the rocks. Robert is a critic trying to write a play, but he's distracted: attentions are being lavished on his talented wife, Claire, by an ambitious composer. When Claire ardently sings the composer's sappy serenade -- well, what's a paranoid husband to think?

The music is brooding and legato -- a slow simmer of despair, ably played by the small orchestra at the Warehouse mainstage -- and the general effect is thoughtful, if not entirely mesmerizing. The ghostly character of the original Schumann (sung by Eric Sillers) appears for a haunted aria as the two muses (Daniele Lorio and Tricia Lepofsky) try to decide whether to help the new Robert, and the muses' duets have a subdued ethereal quality -- not quite witchy, but certainly mischievous and seductive.

The singing is good but not great in this Opera Alterna production. The standout is Tad Czyzewski, whose baritone voice has an authoritative edge and who acts with ease; hanging around in a baseball shirt and slides, his Robert is a compelling underachiever. Sarah Philippa is an appealing Claire, and tenor Robert Legge is cheerful as the gloomy Robert's rival. It's all quite capable, and despite the music's almost resolutely stately pace, the opera's 60 minutes go by quickly.



"Magnum Opus" updates the saga of 19th century composer Robert Schumann. (Capital Fringe Festival)

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-- Nelson Pressley

By Nelson Pressley | July 10, 2009; 4:00 PM ET

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