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PERFORMING ARTS

Monday, February 28, 2011

OPERA

'Trouble in Tahiti' and 'The Medium'

Catholic University's Opera Theater offered a melange in every sense of the word this past weekend. Its doubleheader, which opened Thursday (I was there Friday), juxtaposed Leonard Bernstein's wry "Trouble in Tahiti" with Gian Carlo Menotti's melodramatic "The Medium," featuring a mix of professional and student singers (many of the roles were double-cast) and a small orchestra of professionals and students. The production, small in scale and set in Catholic's venerable but dinky Ward Hall, was nevertheless quite elegant, its sophistication set off by its modest surroundings.

In Bernstein's one-act opera, a day of missed opportunities in the life of an emotionally constipated couple is set off excruciatingly against the backdrop of a "chorus" - in this production, a quartet - of perky singers/dancers/actors who keep showing up like annoying door-to-door hucksters to sell the joys of married bliss. On Friday, they were a wonderfully energetic chorus as they projected the wide-eyed enthusiasm of 1950s pop culture.

The communication-challenged couple, Michael Gigante as Sam and Leslie Baird as Dinah, were strong vocally and dramatically and played off each other with spot-on dramatic timing.

"The Medium" didn't get as well balanced a performance. A more complicated scenario, the show needs to be dominated by the character of Baba, the



DOUBLEHEADER: "Trouble in Tahiti," above, was staged along with "The Medium" over the weekend at Catholic University. (Ed Pfueller/catholic University)

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medium, and, indeed, mezzo-soprano Kristin Green gave a larger-than-life, powerful performance Friday. But her passion and wildness overwhelmed the more modest presences of Catherine Wethington as Monica, Baba's daughter and accomplice, and of John Danley, Katherina Acosta and Lillian Blotkamp as Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau and Mrs. Nolan, all of whom could have made more of their pathetic longings as they hoped to make contact with the spirits of their dead children. Alexander Mosko, compelling as he was as the mute, Toby, didn't move like the mime/dancer the part was written for.

Murry Sidlin led his small band of 17 musicians with a sure and incisive hand, and stage director Jay D. Brock did a terrific job of ensuring that every bit of stage business was necessary and made sense.

- Joan Reinthaler

CLASSICAL MUSIC

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Wu Han and David Finckel
Pianist Wu Han and cellist David Finckel have been labeled the "rock stars of chamber music." Together, the husband-and-wife team lead the venerable Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, where they spend considerable time pondering such things as programming philosophies and sustaining audiences.

The duo returned to the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Center on Friday night, adding violinist Philip Setzer, for

what could arguably be called a resolutely old-fashioned concert experience. There were no new pieces, no gimmicky programming juxtapositions, no chatty remarks to the audience. The music itself - two huge piano trios by Franz Schubert - was all that seemed to matter.

Written together in 1827, Schubert's symphony-size trios are like the mythological double-headed Janus. The B-flat Trio, with its sunny compartment and jaunty rhythms, looks backward to good times, while the E-flat Trio, with its bipolar mood swings and aching melodies, looks forward into the abyss. Schubert, in failing health, would be dead the following year, at age 31.

Han, Finckel and Setzer have been publicly performing these trios for roughly three years, yet they played with the exuberance of musicians still in love with (and in awe of) the music.

Han was the glue throughout the evening, bonding Schubert's many dovetailing melodies with layers of rippling notes, especially in the E-flat Trio's opening Allegro. Finckel shined in the trio's march-driven Andante, supporting its singing, anxious theme with his usual resonant warmth.

With corresponding gravitas, the B-flat Trio's Andante is also its emotional nexus. Setzer's delicate solo exposed Schubert's characteristically bittersweet musical personality.

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Featured Stories section with four items: 'A federal government shutdown: What happens if the funds run out', 'Amid Mideast turmoil, it's business as usual at big Persian Gulf arms show', ''Two and a Half Men' halts production after Sheen's latest radio rant', and 'Slate: Why are so many questions on U.S. citizenship test wrong?'.

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