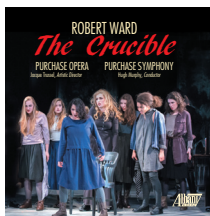


OPERA NEWS

June 2017



CD D'Eramo, Weishoff, Rogers, Karkari, Collins, Kayaalp; Murray, Benevento, Whiteman, Capozzo, Downey, Jones; Purchase Symphony, Murphy. English text. Albany Records Troy 1656/57 (2)



ARTHUR MILLER'S unsettling, canonical play *The Crucible* hasn't lost its relevance.

Based on the Salem witch trials, the 1953 work was written as an allegory for McCarthyism and the ostracism of accused communists. (Miller was hauled before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956.) There are political witch-hunts in every era—it's a favorite tool of totalitarians—so *The Crucible* resonates today as deeply as ever. It's especially welcome that Albany Records has just released a new recording of Robert Ward's Pulitzer Prize-winning operatic adaptation, the first since the original 1962 LP.

Ward creates an atmosphere of tension and menace through fraught yet tonal harmonies, shifting key centers and avoiding cadences. He often uses a major chord with the flatted fifth in the bass (the relationship of a tritone, the "Devil's interval") to indicate the looming threat of witchcraft. He proves an expert musical dramatist, making every line of Bernard Stambler's faithfully adapted prose libretto sing. And the gifted young performers of the Purchase Opera program, based at Purchase College, SUNY, are impressively successful in bringing to life Ward's gripping, clearly etched musical characterizations of Miller's already larger-than-life gallery.

Bryan Murray is powerful and forthright as the flawed but righteous protagonist, John Proctor. In the Act III courtroom scene, when he confesses to his affair with Abigail, his voice is charged with the knowledge of the

punishment he faces, but he doesn't waver. At the end of the opera, he is magnificent in his refusal to sign his own false confession, particularly in his final soliloquy in C-major, a key signifying purity and truth. Rachel Weishoff, as his wife, Elizabeth, shapes and builds her Act II aria with unfolding, well-judged urgency. She and Murray do marvelous work together in the grippingly real final scene, and Weishoff gives a brave, weighty rendering of the opera's last lines: "He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him."

As Abigail Williams, she of the false accusations and faked possessions, the very promising soprano Sylvia D'Eramo sings with an acute instinct for both the passion and the treachery at the character's core. She's especially good in the turbulent Act III scene with Murray's John Proctor, in which she sings with great beauty but is as frightening as any zealot. "But if your sniveling Elizabeth dies, remember—it is you who kill her," she warns, her words dripping with contempt.

The large supporting cast is also strong: as Mary Warren, the Proctors' family servant, Soraya Karkari has the pulsating ring of authenticity, signaling that she tells the truth. Joshua Benevento resists the impulse to play the contemptible Judge Danforth as a cartoon villain, but he does reach heights of righteous hypocrisy when necessary, rising all the way to a high B-flat as he tries to intimidate Elizabeth into incriminating her husband. Colin Whiteman is very appealing as Reverend Hale, who sanely suggests a combination of faith and reason in an enjoyably creepy, harmonically slithering aria in slow, 6/8 time. Later, he's gruff and admonishing as he sings of the social havoc wrought by the climate of hysteria. Ryan Capozzo, as Reverend Parris, is dignified but agi-

tated, generating genuine drama in the opera's opening scene as he tries to extract from Abigail (his niece) the truth about what exactly happened in the forest with her and her friends. As Tituba, the Parris family slave, Cara Collins is convincingly tremulous in proclaiming her own innocence; in Act IV, from inside the Salem jail, she sings a very attractive *Porgy*-ish aria with authentic soul. Caroline Homer provides an alluring descant for this number. The distinctive talents of John Downey, Christopher Jones and Jacob Rivera contribute to the escalating intensity of Ward's brilliantly realized Act III courtroom scene.

The Purchase Symphony, under Hugh Murphy, plays with obvious commitment and artistry. This is unquestionably an opportune moment for a fine new recording of an important opera that proclaims the value of truth above all, even one's own life. —Joshua Rosenblum

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