

New York

For those in search of the new, January is a hectic month in New York. The key event is the APAP conference (it stands for ASSOCIATION OF PERFORMING ARTS PRESENTERS), which attracts presenters from all over the country and the world to showcases of new work. APAP has inspired numerous satellite festivals devoted to theatre, dance, performance and music theatre. Chief among the last of those is the PROTOTYPE FESTIVAL, which began last year as a joint project of Beth Morrison Projects (an increasingly prominent producer of new opera) and HERE (a Lower Manhattan performance space). This year it expanded to even more locations and offered a programme including four staged chamber operas or quasi-operas.

The clear highlight was *Paul's Case* by Gregory Spears (seen on January 13). With a smart libretto by Kathryn Walat and Spears himself, the opera is based on a 1905 short story by Willa Cather, about a sensitive young man ('something of a dandy') who hates his boring life in steel-town Pittsburgh, absconds with cash from his dead-end job, and escapes for a weekend of the high life at the Waldorf Astoria in New York, before committing suicide. The subject seems obviously gay, but the story is set in an era when the depiction or even the mention of overt homosexuality was taboo.

Jonathan Blalock made an ideal Paul, dreamy, smirking and vulnerable. He sang the persistently high tenor vocal lines surely. Keith Phares as his father and James Shaffran as the school principal both offered stern, stentorian bass-baritones, and the trio of three women (successively harping school teachers, escapist variety-hall performers and cheerful hotel maids) sang, acted and danced delightfully. They couldn't have done so without the compelling stage direction of Kevin Newbury, who kept the whole dream floating serenely, a mirror of Paul's fantasizing. Robert Wood (the general director of UrbanArias from Washington, DC, which first produced the opera) conducted the pianist Keith Chambers and eight players from the American Modern Ensemble.

And the music made the show. It was basically tonal, with an underlying minimalism that sounded nothing like the Glass-Reich template. There were many repeated phrases, vocal and instrumental, which may have alluded to Baroque practice. The vocal lines were eminently singable, without breaking down into obvious arias; many of them began

■ *'Paul's Case' by Gregory Spears, one of the premieres at this year's Prototype Festival*



with an odd, hiccup-like ornament. What was even more remarkable was the instrumental colour, with the piano providing intensely dramatic punctuation, a harp accenting quietly, two clarinets lending a soft, floating quality ideally evocative of Paul's dreaminess, and a string quintet filling out harmonious yet pungent accompaniment, lush and billowing. To these ears, it was all very beautiful.

The three other fully-staged Prototype operas made a lesser impact, though each had its

moments. *Have a Good Day!* had travelled the furthest: it was performed (in Lithuanian, with titles projected on the rear wall) by OPERAROMANIJA, from Vilnius, and there were a lot of proud Lithuanians in the audience at HERE on January 16. This was a nearly all-female endeavour, including the composer (Lisa Papelyté), the librettist (Vaiva Graintyé), the stage director and the producer. Papelyté's short opera depicts checkout women at a supermarket, with little vignettes individuating them but with all subsumed into the numbing routine of late-capitalist menial work. It seemed intended (despite a disclaimer) as a critique of post-Communist consumerism, but with a whimsical touch. The libretto was very clever; the music—a cappella or accompanied by a spinet piano and vague supermarket ambiance—sounded simplistic in its sing-song minimalism.

A double bill from the composer Jonathan Berger called *Visitations* examined auditory hallucinations by schizophrenics (*Theotokia*) and post-traumatic stress syndrome in a combat photographer (*The War Reporter*). The bill was presented at ROULETTE in Brooklyn and seen on January 13. The production, by Rinde Eckert, had its moments, as did Dan O'Brian's libretto, but the music and the overall impact were earnest and dull. The singing by Melissa Hughes and a medieval vocal quartet, New York Polyphony, and the playing of the JACK Quartet and others, all conducted by Christopher Rountree, were first-rate.

Thumbprint, about rape and redemption in Pakistan, opened the festival at Manhattan's BARUCH PERFORMING ARTS CENTRE (seen January 10). It was composed by Kamala Sankaram, who sang the leading role. Based on a true story, it tells of a woman raped by members of a higher caste in retribution for a supposed insult to their honour. Instead of killing herself in shame, as the rapists expect, she gets them convicted and goes on to found a school for women—who will no longer have to sign their names with their thumbprints. The opera seemed weighed down with good intentions, and the music, notwithstanding some telling moments, failed to lift it. Such as they were, the devil got all the good tunes.

Beyond Prototype, the peripatetic GOTHAM CHAMBER OPERA journeyed down to ST PAUL'S CHAPEL in Trinity Wall Street, once in the shadow of the World Trade Center and miraculously spared on 9/11, to present Charpentier's *La Descente d'Orphée aux enfers*. Composed in 1686, this two-act opera ends with Orpheus leading Eurydice up from the underworld, although in Andrew Eggert's production Orpheus looks back at her at the very end, foreshadowing bad news just ahead. Scholars speculate that there was a lost third act fleshing out the story.



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Gotham's performance was honourable and inelegant. Neal Goren, the company's director and conductor, professes a deep admiration for William Christie, but Christie's recording of this score far surpasses what one heard on January 3. Trinity Church, poor sightlines and all, has an ambitious early-music programme, and its choir and Baroque Ensemble provided the worthy musicians. The cast, led by the tenor Daniel Curran and soprano Jamilyn Manning-White as Orpheus and Eurydice, was competent but undistinguished, and the decor looked a little too close to a high-school play.

For some of us, Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's *The Mother of Us All* counts as the finest American opera, though of late *Satyagraha* seems to be giving it a run for primacy. The venturesome and often tellingly effective opera programme at the MANHATTAN SCHOOL OF MUSIC gave this feminist meditation an honourable production in its JOHN C. BORDEN AUDITORIUM, whose modest size is particularly suitable for this conversational score (seen on December 11).

Dona D. Vaughn, who directs the programme, was the producer, and offered a good representation of this pageant-like piece, abetted by simple sets from Edward Rom, dominated by the American flag and an oversized copy of Picasso's iconic portrait of Stein, and nicely detailed costumes from Tracy Dorman. Steven Osgood conducted the student orchestra decently, though with a lack of the ideal snap and precision needed to lift this spare, folksy score into eloquence.

The main trouble, though, lay with the singers, with many of the key roles mis- or undercast. The 'mother' in question is Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), a fighter for

■ *Noragh Devlin as Susan B. Anthony in 'The Mother of Us All' at the MSM*



women's suffrage, a goal realized only after her death: the final scene, in which as a statue in the Halls of Congress she muses over her 'long life of effort and strife', is particularly moving. The part is for soprano, and the high notes must bloom. Curiously, there has been a tendency to assign the part to a mezzo—for example, Mignon Dunn, now a Manhattan School voice faculty member, who sang the role in the Santa Fe Opera production under Raymond Leppard that was subsequently recorded. Here the part was taken by Noragh Devlin, who peeled forth strongly enough but turned hard and hooty up top. Nearly all the rest of the cast sounded decent but—inevitably perhaps—too young, although Gina Perregrino, Kasia Borowiec, Addison Hamilton and especially Alexander Frankel as Jo the Loiterer had their nice moments.

JOHN ROCKWELL