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KARCHIN: *Romulus*

□ *Thurman; Ebel, Meglioranza, Pauley; The Washington Square Ensemble, Karchin. English text. Naxos 8.669030*



Romulus, a one-act comic opera by Louis Karchin (b. 1951), announces its originality right out of the gate with its short, whimsical instrumental introduction and sustains it through to the very end of its seventy-two-minute running time. Karchin's *Romulus* is based on Barnett Shaw's English translation of the similarly named play by Alexandre Dumas père, author of *The Three Musketeers*. (It was his son, Dumas fils, who wrote the play *The Lady of the Camellias*, the source for *La Traviata*.) The libretto is the dialogue of the play, not a verse adaptation, and yet the score manages to avoid the rambling, formless quality of

many other contemporary operas that similarly consist mostly of recitative. This is a testimony to Karchin's fertile musical invention and the strong theatrical instincts he brings to bear in the vivid realization of his four characters. The music is unfailingly fresh and chromatically adventurous; it's certainly not tonal in any traditional harmonic sense, but its dissonances are playful and ear-catching, falling well short of outright atonality.

Romulus tells the story of Celestus, an astronomer, and his sister, Martha, who are cohabiting peaceably with their friend Wolf, a philosopher. Everything seems fine until a baby in a basket mysteriously appears in their midst. The menacing Mayor Babenhausen drops by to investigate and insinuates that the baby is the child of Martha and Wolf. Wolf proposes to Martha that they marry in order to spare Martha's reputation. When the Mayor's own daughter is revealed to be the real mother, Martha and Wolf decide to marry anyway, and all is well again.

Romulus, composed in 1990, received its premiere in a 2007 production by American Opera Projects at the Guggenheim Museum's Peter B. Lewis Theater, and that exceptionally capable cast has returned for this recording. Soprano Katrina Thurman as Martha stands out for her wonderfully clear, pointed sound and the natural warmth she brings to her character. Thomas Meglioranza as Celestus, her brother, has an equally appealing and direct conversational delivery, with a solid tonal foundation. Steven Ebel as their housemate Wolf, the absent-minded philosophy professor, grows unexpectedly tender when the baby shows up and by

the end turns into a romantic lead (or at least Karchin's version thereof). Tenor Ebel and baritone Meglioranza have similar colorings to their voices, but Karchin is creative in his musical differentiation of the characters. Mayor Babenhausen's vocal lines are spiky and dissonant but are delivered handily by the wonderfully adept character bass Wilbur Pauley, who specializes in this sort of thing. Karchin himself conducts the Washington Square Ensemble, a group of top New York freelancers of which he is a codirector. The players deliver a polished, vibrantly colored performance that no doubt pleases the composer greatly. □

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