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A Century and a Half Later, a Novel Inspires an Opera

By STEVE SMITH

Vivid adventure novels like “The Three Musketeers” and “The Count of Monte Cristo” made the French author Alexandre Dumas père one of the best-selling writers of the 19th century. He turned some of his books into plays, and adaptations of works like those must have been a tantalizing prospect for ambitious opera composers. Yet despite attempts to work with Bellini and Meyerbeer, Dumas neither produced nor inspired a libretto of lasting importance. (His son, Alexandre Dumas fils, far less a man of the theater, wrote “La Dame aux Camélias,” the novel on which Verdi based “La Traviata.”)

But especially in opera, old literature has a way of casting a spell across generations and centuries. For his first opera the composer Louis Karchin chose “Romulus,” an 1854 comedy by Dumas père about two scholarly bachelors whose lives are disrupted by the mysterious appearance of an infant in their home, in an English translation by Barnett Shaw. Mr. Karchin completed the work in 1990; American Opera Projects mounted its stage premiere at the Guggenheim Museum’s Peter B. Lewis Theater on Sunday night.

The challenge, at least initially, was in reconciling so slight and charming a story with Mr. Karchin’s solidly modernist idiom. The music, scored for a small group of strings, winds, piano and percussion, was angular and chromatic. Even so, it seemed to unfurl in a ceaseless strand of gentle lyricism, filled with timbral variety and punctuated by passages of puckish humor that deftly mirrored the stage action. Mr. Karchin conducted members of the Washington Square Ensemble in a lively, polished performance.

As the intense astronomer Celestus, the striking baritone Thomas Meglioranza sang in clipped phrases. The philosopher Wolf, portrayed by Steven Ebel, a tenor, delivered more flowing lines. Katrina Thurman, a soprano, was perky as Martha, Celestus’s sister and caretaker of both bachelors. The veteran bass Wilbur Pauley, as the mayor Babenhausen, sang imperiously, accompanied by pompous fanfares.

All of these performers sang excellently, their clear enunciation a particular boon given supertitles that operated intermittently. The director, Peter Flynn, called upon their comedic gifts in action that often verged on slapstick. Glenn Reed’s skeletal set offered all that was needed for this character-driven tale; Jesse Klug’s subtle lighting was especially effective when Wolf confessed his passion for Martha near the conclusion. The briskly paced comedy fell a few minutes short of an hour. I would have happily stayed to hear it performed again.