

New Music Connoisseur

Review by Carlton Wilkinson ©2008

The Construction of Boston: Opera in One Act. Music by Scott Wheeler (b. 1952) Words by Kenneth Koch (1925-2002). William Hite, Charles Blandy, tenors; Marcus DeLoach, Christopher Nomura, baritones; Krista River, mezzo-soprano; Elizabeth Anker, contralto; Christine Swistro, Sharla Nafziger, sopranos. Chorus & Orchestra of The Boston Cecilia, Donald Teeters, Conductor. Naxos, 2008. CD 8.669018 Time: 59:07

"The best understanding of a work is always to be gotten from the work itself." So announces the opening narrator (the character of the Opera, speaking for itself) in Wheeler's one-act "The Construction of Boston"--a simple statement that almost negates the possibility of a proper review. Or maybe limits the effort to seven words: "Listen to it for yourself." But as it happens, this opening statement is less true of "The Construction of Boston" than it would be for most operas. Here, the tale is not entirely self-explanatory and there is much to say regarding the opera's construction and performance, more, in fact than I could possibly squeeze into a review.

The play by Kenneth Koch, on which the opera is based, dates from 1962 and is an allegory for artistic creation. In that performance, his three artist collaborators, Robert Rauschenberg, Jean Tinguely and Niki Saint-Phalle, built a likeness of the city onstage while two narrators read Koch's deliberately guileless and heroic verse. When Koch created the libretto in 1990-91, the characters of the three artists were preserved in roles of the principle singers. (Koch died in 2002. The real Rauschenberg, the last surviving member of the original team, died in May 2008.) Each artist is responsible for a specific aspect of the city's genesis. Rauschenberg brings the people and the "city weather," Tinguely creates the buildings and reforms the landscape, and Saint-Phalle endows the whole with beauty, using her magic pistol. (Saint-Phalle is famous for shooting holes into paint cans embedded in the plaster as finishing touches on her assemblages.)

The musical style is both post-minimalist in orchestration and rhythm and post-modern in its appropriation of styles. Wheeler's opera churns with a rhythmic and polyrhythmic vitality, sliding through unexpected shifts of triad-based harmonies, reminiscent of John Adams' best work. The childlike tone of the libretto, glorifying the world's "best city" and its geographical location, also has the decidedly modernist tone of Glass' and Adams' operas, clean dramatic lines and lots of space in the detail, letting the viewer fill in meaning--the stylized purity of a Soviet propaganda poster.

The music is at its best in the complex polyrhythms of the overture and the opera's second half as first Tinguely and then Saint-Phalle do their work and the city (and the opera) achieves its heavenly apex. The strings occasionally struggle

with some delicate evocation of just intonation (as a symbol of the rich Eden of nature). But despite such minor lapses the performance is superb and exciting throughout. Nomura, Hite, and Nafziger are great as Rauschenberg, Tinguely and Saint-Phalle, respectively. Hite is also the voice of the opening character, The Opera, a role he imbues with a rousing intensity. Nafziger gives the playfully aloof, self-admiring Saint-Phalle a natural serenity and beauty. While the libretto doesn't shy from art as ego, Saint-Phalle more than either of the other characters is portrayed as an embodiment of art as Narcissus and the idol of an adoring universe. Some beautiful instrumental touches are found throughout, including the use of a banjo, strings, harp and harpsichord in various combinations. (Naxos lamentably does not include a list of specific instrumentation or orchestra members with its CD information.)

On the whole, an engaging one-hour work, a thoroughly original libretto, and a polished performance.