

MUSIC

Review: Matthew Aucoin's 'Crossing' Is a Taut, Inspired Opera

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI MAY 31, 2015

BOSTON — At 25, the American composer, conductor, pianist, poet and sometime critic Matthew Aucoin has already been an assistant conductor at the Metropolitan Opera, made his conducting debut with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and written pieces for Yo-Yo Ma, among other renowned artists, not to mention lecturing on music and poetry at the Shakespeare Society in New York.

What seems clear, after the premiere of his opera “Crossing” on Friday night here at the Shubert Theater in the Citi Performing Arts Center, is that Mr. Aucoin is also afire for the genre of opera. Presented by the American Repertory Theater, based in Cambridge, in association with Music-Theater Group, “Crossing” is a taut, teeming and inspired work. With a libretto by Mr. Aucoin, the opera is based on the diaries of Walt Whitman from his transformative experience tending to wounded soldiers during the Civil War at makeshift hospitals on the outskirts of Washington.

Though certain aspects of the score suggest that Mr. Aucoin has yet to define fully his composer's voice, he clearly has prodigious gifts. The music grabbed me right through the opera's 1-hour-40-minute running time, without intermission, especially as played here by the dynamic chamber orchestra A Far Cry, conducted by Mr. Aucoin. His score draws upon myriad modernist and Neo-Classical styles, with hints of Britten, Bernstein, Thomas Adès, techno and much more. With his acute ear and abundant technique, Mr. Aucoin deftly folds diverse musical strands into this restless score, which can shift from skittish frenzy to stretches of aching lyricism. Surely, his style will gain a more personal profile as he matures.

What he already brings to bear, though, is a powerful vision for what he wants opera to be, along with an instinctive way of melding words and music to tell a story. Mr. Aucoin, rather like Janacek in his operas, writes music that activates the text. In whole stretches, the orchestra almost hugs each word with some piercing harmony, or doubles a vocal line with instruments.

The shadowy, sometimes dreamlike production, directed by Diane Paulus, with simple sets by Tom Pye, allowed the urgent music and the outstanding singers to come first.

The Whitman presented here is less American's towering poet-mystic than a poignantly self-doubting man, the mate and companion of people, as Whitman wrote in words Mr. Aucoin draws from, all "just as immortal and fathomless as myself."

The opera opens with a prologue featuring Whitman facing the audience, with about a dozen beds in a ramshackle wood hospital barely visible behind him. The baritone Rod Gilfry, singing with sturdy expressivity and quiet charisma, commands the stage as Whitman from his first phrase, when the poet asks, "What is it, then, between us?," a crucial line from the poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

The opera is about crossings on many levels: between poet and reader, performer and audience, and, most profoundly for this Whitman, between the contradictory elements of his own self, as Mr. Aucoin writes in a program note. As Whitman explains, he first came to the hospital to find his wounded brother, who was soon healed. "Why can I not leave?" he asks. "What is it that I am looking for?"

The bloodied soldiers in ragtag clothing (by the designer David Zinn) are sung by an ensemble of male singers who join together for intricate choral segments, though I hesitate to describe them as a chorus, since Mr. Aucoin gives individual musical and dramatic traits to each one. The numbing routine of the hospital is shaken by the arrival of a wary, hotheaded young wounded man. Near-delirious, he sings, "Is anyone listening?" Whitman is immediately drawn to this haunted-looking soldier, who, the poet learns, is John Wormley, of Boston.

From the inconsistencies of his story it becomes clear that Wormley is a

schemer hiding the truth. The affecting young tenor Alexander Lewis brings cagey intensity to the role, singing by turns with flashes of defiance and pleading despair. As written by Mr. Aucoin, Wormley is a complex character that young tenors will be eager to take on.

Mr. Gilfry's Whitman tenderly cares for this needy man. Though Whitman is thought to have been homosexual or bisexual, biographers disagree over whether he actually had sex with men. The Whitman of "Crossing" does. Wormley, in anguish one night as the other men groan in their sleep, calls Whitman to his bed. "You are alone/ I'm alone, too./ Take me and let me take you." Mr. Gilfry's Whitman cannot resist.

The next day, Whitman abjectly asks forgiveness for crossing a sacred boundary. Wormley lashes out, calling him a pervert: "You're only here to suck young blood!"

Whitman soon learns that Wormley is actually a Rebel soldier who considers himself a traitor. That "Crossing" invents this romantic involvement for Whitman seems a testimony to Mr. Aucoin's determination to bend the genre to his ends. This operatic Whitman taps into real questions about the poet. "Crossing" suggests that Whitman's attraction to men, feelings that might have twisted a lesser person, made him more empathetic toward other people's natures and sufferings.

The opera contains only two other solo roles. The bass-baritone Davone Tines's mellow voice and muscular presence are ideal for Freddie Stowers, born a slave in South Carolina, who escaped at 13 and later joined the Union forces. Stowers's story leads Whitman to reflect that "My words are mere nothingness/ Next to such a man." And in a short scene a messenger, the bright-voiced soprano Jennifer Zetlan, comes with news that the war has ended, bringing a moment of cherubic grace, and a lone female voice to the opera. Before the final chorus, the dying Wormley and fatherly Whitman bond in a transfixing scene, music alive with spiraling riffs and elegiac vocal lines.

At this crucial moment in Mr. Aucoin's fast-rising career, he would be wise to ignore the talk of him as opera's great hope and just keep working hard on his art. The future of opera depends on companies commissioning lots of composers to write new ones. American Repertory Theater, which is not even in the full-time opera

business, has done its part in bringing Mr. Aucoin's powerful work to the stage.

"Crossing" runs through Saturday at the Shubert Theater in the Citi Performing Arts Center, Boston; 866-348-9738, americanrepertorytheater.org.

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