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Ancient myth with (electro-acoustic) resonance



From left, Paul Guttry, Matthew Anderson, and Pamela Dellal in "The Puzzle Master."

By Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff | May 7, 2007

The story of Daedalus, the mythic master-inventor who fashioned the labyrinth of the minotaur and a fateful pair of wings for his own son Icarus, has not tempted nearly as many composers over time as the tale of Orpheus. But it is a myth with ample resonance in an age that places great faith in our ability to control and manipulate nature through science and technology. Are we slowly learning to master each of nature's puzzles, or is our yearning for mastery itself a kind of hubris that dooms us to failure?

These at least are the themes explored by "The Puzzle Master," a complex and entrancing multi media oratorio with a haunting score composed by Eric Chasalow and a libretto by the poet F.D. Reeve. The work had its premiere performances this weekend at the Laurie Theater at Brandeis University as part of the Boston Cyberarts Festival.

The opera updates the Daedalus myth to make the central character, now called Delling, into an engineer who has retired to a Caribbean island and is looking back on his life and recalling the tragedy of his son Icarus, here called Ingram. Besides these two characters, Chasalow's score features a large role for a vocal trio that functions like a Greek chorus, commenting on and sometimes participating in the events that transpire. These include many of the famous scenes of mythological legend, including Delling's (Daedalus's) invention of a special device that allows Pasiphae (here called Queen Prue) to sate her

lustful desires for a bull (later giving birth to the minotaur). Delling then makes wings so that he and his son can escape, but the son, who shares his father's desire to overcome the laws of nature, flies too close to the sun, melts his wings, and crashes fatally into the sea.

Reeve's modern libretto is eloquent and sly, and Chasalow, a composer on the faculty of Brandeis who specializes in electro-acoustic music, has set the text with integrity, supple craft, and at times arresting beauty. Delling often sings in a kind of lyrical and expressive sprechstimme and the writing for the "chorus" ranges from a bracing style full of wide leaps to a very poignant madrigal-like setting spiked with pungent dissonances. For the passage where the chorus comforts Ingram's soul after he has fallen into the sea, Chasalow writes a kind of church-like music that sounds at once both ancient and very modern.

Through it all, a solo piano line, played by Yoshiko Hiramatsu-Kline, comments, amplifies, and sometimes subverts the mood with pointy obbligato figures or hazy atmospheric lines. The electronic music is confined largely to interludes between scenes, but it is imaginative and unpredictable, with a textural richness to its surfaces.

On Saturday night, with help from Eric Hewitt's clear conducting, all five singers navigated this extremely difficult score with impressive accuracy and musicality. Donald Wilkinson sang Delling with a strong yet sweet-toned baritone that captured some of his character's defiant pride but also his wistfulness and rue as he looked back on his life. Jennifer Ashe sang Ingram with a pure, clear tone that conveyed the innocence of the character's tender age. Matthew Anderson, Pamela Dellal, and Paul Guttery were each excellent in the chorus and sometimes doubling in smaller roles.

Behind all of this was a video by Denise Marika, projected onto a screen covered with vertical two-by-fours that were removed in the final scene. The video imagery was often unsettling and opaque, sometimes evocative and sometimes simply disturbing. Close-ups of the human body from odd angles or engaged in mysterious activities, abstract images processed as if through a paper shredder, and in the final scene, as Chasalow's music rises to its most ethereal, Marika presents the haunting image of a presumed corpse in a body bag tumbling with painful slowness down a long staircase.

For me the video overall distracted more than it enlightened, but other viewers may well disagree. Certainly, this music could stand on its own, though given the density of this rich, multi-layered score, supertitles would also be helpful.

Jeremy Eichler can be reached at jeichler@globe.com. ■

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