

San Francisco

Like its title character, John Harbison's opera *The Great Gatsby* has been waiting years for a second chance at love, or at least acceptance. Coolly received on its 1999 premiere at the Metropolitan Opera, Harbison's adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel had a run of performances at the Lyric Opera of Chicago and a brief Met revival before retreating to the sidelines, where it languished until it caught the attention of the conductor Nicole Paiement and her enterprising ENSEMBLE PARALLELE. Paiement has made a dual specialty of championing overlooked contemporary works (most notably Lou Harrison's homoerotic *Young Caesar* and Philip Glass's *Orphée*) and of scaling full-size scores down to manageable chamber dimensions; a 2010 *Wozzeck*, in a virtuosic reorchestration by John Rea, offered an economical version of the familiar masterpiece.



■ Susannah Biller as Daisy Buchanan in *'The Great Gatsby' in San Francisco*

On February 11, Paiement and the director Brian Staufenbiel made an impassioned case for the virtues of Harbison's creation, and Jacques Desjardins expertly reduced the orchestral forces to some 30 instruments. Still, there was nothing in this generally admirable revival to significantly alter the impression left by the piece 13 years ago. Harbison's score is an elegant and often richly expressive fusion of pungent neo-tonality with the distinctive strains of the work's Jazz Age setting. But the dramaturgy is clumsy, as Harbison's libretto moves through a series of bluntly delineated set pieces that never achieve a sustained dramatic flow. (The libretto includes a striking number of lines like 'Where is the old warm world?' or 'George married me in a borrowed suit' that seem all too frankly designed as aria titles.) And the protocol of arias, duets and ensembles seems to have restricted rather than freed Harbison's creative juices. The most alluring aspect of the opera is the ease with which the composer weaves together 1920s popular song and modern operatic language. The score includes a number of soigné foxtrots, tangos and ballads done in perfect period style (these have been excerpted as a fine song collection), and in two extended scenes set at Gatsby's elaborate house parties, Harbison sets the foreground dialogue seamlessly to the rhythms of the background dance. The models are the Act 1 finale from *Don Giovanni* and the opening of *Rigoletto*, and Harbison actually holds his own in that company. Yet here, especially, the new low-calorie orchestration felt out of place—as though Gatsby, the nervous arriviste, were improbably throwing parties on the cheap.

Staufenbiel's staging made resourceful use of space in San Francisco's YERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS. The God-like gaze from the billboard advertising the services of the oculist T. J. Eckleburg—a weighty symbol in Fitzgerald's novel—was conveyed by

an eerie film clip, and another one helped shuttle the main characters in and out of Manhattan in their deadly motorcars. Matthew Antaky's sets and Christine Crook's costumes used a few deft strokes to conjure up Gatsby's mansion, a Manhattan hotel suite, and poor George Wilson's dusty auto garage.

With Paiement leading a crisp and responsive performance, the cast mostly dispatched its assignments with aplomb. The exception was the tenor Marco Panuccio in the title role, who struggled to negotiate the part's high tessitura and was too dramatically impassive to convey much of either Gatsby's anxious striving or his easy bonhomie. But the soprano Susannah Biller was a charming, bright-toned Daisy Buchanan, and the baritone Jason Detwiler, in a performance of vocal weight and dramatic assurance, moved Fitzgerald's narrator Nick Carraway from the periphery into the centre of the proceedings through sheer force of will. More riveting still was Daniel Snyder as the loutish Tom Buchanan, a role that combines Heldentenor sonorities with the ominous orchestral rhetoric of Hunding; without stinting on the character's brutality, Snyder conveyed something of his raffish charm as well. The mezzo Julienne Walker sang with gleaming directness as the tennis pro Jordan Baker, and the bass-baritone Bojan Knezevic brought an eloquently wounded growl to the part of the cuckolded Wilson. His wife Myrtle—a role created unforgettably by the late Lorraine Hunt Lieberson—was handled capably but without that earthy magnetism by Erin Neff.

JOSHUA KOSMAN

Seattle

I am an unapologetic fan of Verdi's rugged Risorgimento operas, so I was enthusiastic when SEATTLE OPERA announced its first *Attila*. While the production (seen on January 14) did not always deliver the full patriotic jolt this opera is famous for, it did carry a much-welcomed measure of Verdian vocal thrills. Bernard Uzan's contemporary spin on the libretto's narrative of urban elites vs. the barbarian horde was by and large effective. In Melanie Taylor Burgess's costumes, the Huns sported hard-core anarchist trappings, their browns and olives providing striking contrast to the resisting Italians' primary colours. Marco Vratogna's Ezio was a soldier's soldier, stiffly uniformed in appropriately garish Garibaldian crimson. Odabella and her beret-topped feminine brigade stood out in solid blue. The black-leather bad-boy image suited Antonello Palombi's petulant Foresto amusingly well. You knew instantly who was who in this battle of political extremes. Uzan's penchant for laying on the brutality did occasionally work against opera's dramaturgy, yet, for the most part, the contemporary references often gave the old story a new kick.

But these kicks failed to reach the many intimate duets, trios and ensemble finales, where conceptual insights faded and mundane, old-school posturing returned. At these points one could rely on the strength of the singing. Ana Lucrecia García launched herself at Odabella's coloratura fearlessly, her warm timbre gratifyingly even in spite of vaulting register extremes. Palombi showed an even greater command of Verdian style, shaping Foresto's arching lines with exquisitely tapered pianissimos. If Vratogna's Ezio lacked ping at the top, there was enough sound and fury elsewhere to compensate. Looming above them all, in altitude as well as voice, was John Relyea's formidable Attila. His black timbre and intense, imperious stage presence proved the perfect catalyst for the rage that surrounded him. With the conductor Carlo Montanaro's stinging rhythmic precision hurtling through Verdi's musical sorties, two hours scorched by effortlessly. And isn't that exactly what you want in a rousing lyrical screed such as this?

THEODORE DEACON