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A Remarkably Inventive A Cappella Premiere

By HEIDI WALESON

Memphis, Tenn.

Is it possible to write an opera without an orchestra? Composer Michael Ching's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," given its world premiere here by Opera Memphis and Playhouse on the Square, has a "voicestra," an ensemble of a cappella singers, instead of instruments in the pit. Popular a cappella has branched out in recent years from its old-fashioned roots (think "The Whiffenpoof Song") to all kinds of music, including elaborate arrangements of up-to-the-minute rock and hip-hop numbers, with voices re-creating the instrumental parts.



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Sean Davis/Opera Memphis

Charles Ponder, as Bottom, with the fairies.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Opera Memphis
Through Feb. 13

draws from musical theater, and the play-acting workmen occasionally borrow tunes (Flute/Thisbe's speech in the rehearsal is comically set to a bit of "I Am Sixteen, Going on Seventeen" from "The Sound of Music"). Opera singers take the roles of Oberon and Titania, and double as Theseus and Hippolyta, thus giving the grandest style to the rulers of fairyland and Athens, respectively.

These seamless changes in tone, Mr. Ching's fine sense of pacing and skill with ensemble writing, and Gary John La Rosa's lively direction resulted in an engaging evening. The production was simple: Nick Mozak's set wreathed the proscenium with vegetation, and it used columns and hanging vines to differentiate between the forest and the palace; John Horan's colorful lighting supplied changes of mood, and Amie Eoff's costumes—skimpy dresses for Hermia and Helena, grand robes for the rulers—made their points without fuss.

The excellent cast featured Jennifer Goode Cooper, a lustrous soprano, as Titania and Hippolyta; she threw off a few Queen of the Night-ish roulades with great aplomb. As her consorts, the solid, accomplished baritone

Mr. Ching's remarkably inventive opera is a celebration of what voices can do and still, with the exception of a few startling vocal percussion effects, sound like voices. The voicestra—between 15 and 20 amplified voices, depending on the performance—supports the singers on the stage, its overlapping lines and syllables weaving around them, amplifying their characters and conflicts, sometimes echoing their words (or even their thoughts), or supplying atmosphere. The voicestra gives the opera an added human dimension, and its invisibility goes with the magical nature of the story.

The text, taken from Shakespeare, has far more prominence here than most opera composers allow, as Mr. Ching's tonal and tuneful vocal lines are written for maximum intelligibility rather than musical display, and some of the words are spoken. (There were no supertitles.) To mix things up even further, the lovers, especially Hermia and Helena, often sing in a style that

Jeremiah Johnson brought playfulness to Oberon and rationality to Theseus. Though Laura Stracko, who sang with a deliberately scoopy music-theater style, struggled a bit with Hermia's highest notes, she and Emily Bodkin (Helena), a spirited mezzo, made a hilarious pair of opposites—short/tall, confident/bewildered—so their confrontation in Act II ignited brilliantly. The male lovers were also well set up as opposites: John Dooley brought a warm, supple baritone and an unusually lustful characterization to Lysander; tenor Robert Legge was a pouty Demetrius.

Heather Jenkins displayed a dizzyingly high soprano in the fairy lullaby; mezzo Kristin Vienneau brought sparkle to other fairy solo moments. Kyle Huey, whose background is music theater, was feisty and fun as Puck, holding the stage with authority. The other fairies were primarily used as dancers, capably choreographed by Mr. La Rosa.

DeltaCappella, the Memphis male a cappella ensemble that was the inspiration for the opera, formed a key part of the cast. (Mr. Ching, who was general and artistic director of the Memphis Opera until last year, was the group's vocal coach.) Along with RIVA, a female a cappella group, their members made up the voicestra, and some of them also climbed out of the pit to play the parts of the mechanicals. Charles Ponder and Thomas "TeKay" King, both large, African-American men, brought a particularly potent energy to Bottom/Pyramus and Flute/Thisbe. Mr. Ponder's rendition of Pyramus's death scene, set hilariously to "E lucevan le stelle" from "Tosca," was brilliantly over the top, while Mr. King gave Thisbe's lament a bare, touching gravity.

The voicestra itself, conducted by Curtis Tucker, was splendid, creating a variety of sounds and textures—the haunting background of Oberon's "I know a bank"; a sinister repetition of "Chop! Chop!" when Hermia's angry father Egeus (Kent Fleshman) demanded "the law upon [Lysander's] head"; hunting-horn fanfares to awaken the lovers; a forest full of insect noises. It was fascinating to read the biographies of these fine avocational musicians in the program—one is an ear, nose and throat surgeon; another is a special-education teacher. In addition to creating a new kind of opera, Mr. Ching and Opera Memphis deserve recognition for successfully incorporating a wonderful local resource into their work.

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.

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