

THE REPUBLICAN

'Bug Opera' soars to new heights

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Music writer

AMHERST - Entomological angst played to a packed house Monday evening at the Eric Carle Museum in "The Bug Opera," a new children's work by composer Geoffrey Hudson and librettist Alisa Pearson, directed by Masha Obolensky and conducted by Bruce Hangen, principal guest conductor of the Boston Pops and Conductor of Youth and Family Concerts for the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Review In the opera, a caterpillar reluctant to undergo metamorphosis meets a mosquito squeamish about drinking blood, and the two go about the business of helping each other deal with their phobias, encountering an industrious dung beetle, a pompous paper wasp, a magical luna moth, and a voracious spider in their travels through the forest.

If you think about it, singing bugs are no weirder than a lot of stuff that happens in "real" opera, and as "The Bug Opera's" creators maintain on their Web site, "Bugs are the stuff of legend, every bug is a storybook, kids are hungry for stories, and opera is the ultimate story-telling medium, so what could be more natural than an opera for kids about bugs?"

Hudson's music was clever and well-crafted, reminiscent of Bernstein or perhaps of a light-hearted, avuncular Stravinsky. He understands the kinds of melodies singers like to sing, and within the boundaries of carefully conceived formal harmonic plan, gives them those kinds of melodies. The luna moth's vocalise in Act II was supreme, as were the paper wasp's polyglot waltz and many of the mosquito's laments, all very shapely and leading to blooming high notes that are the meat and potatoes of opera singing.

"The Bug Opera" is not children's music, though there are plenty of catchy Latin rhythms and repetitive figures to hold the attention of the young. It comes nowhere near Ravel's "L'Enfant et les Sortilèges" for sophistication and compositional tightness, but it looks knowingly in that direction, and recognizes the value of, as well as the dramatic risk inherent in slow, atmospheric ensembles (particularly unaccompanied ones). It was Hudson that ultimately won a standing ovation during the curtain calls.

Pearson's libretto was full of word-play for all ages, from the childish, scatological patter of the dung-beetle, (albeit peppered with operatic in-jokes like "chacun a son gout," an apt reference after all, linking to an operetta about a bat) to the continental foppishness of the paper wasp. The cast's attention to diction put much of the libretto across quite clearly, despite some balance issues with the chamber orchestra.

Mezzo-soprano Janna Baty stole the show as the Spider, delivering her predatory tango with the kind of perfection of character Angela Lansbury brought to Sondheim's Mrs. Lovett in "Sweeney Todd." Pearson, herself a fine soprano, gave the Luna Moth's wordless exultation an ethereal, luminous sheen. Soprano Karen Vincent offered a nimble and sweet-toned Mosquito.

Tenor Matthew DiBattista was delightfully insufferable as the paper wasp, and bass-baritone Aaron Theno warmly earthy and immediately likable as the dung beetle. Baritone Nikolas Nackley employed pure, precise vocalism and compelling innocence in his central role as the sort of tragic hero. Aboleo Montanari did a delightful, all too brief terpsichorean turn as a Moth Dancer.

At times the full-voiced operatic vocal production seemed at odds with the style of the music, as in the firefly quartet (Theno, DiBattista, Baty, and soprano Beth Canterbury) cast in the bebop idiom of the Manhattan Transfer, but lacking the unified croon that makes that fast-moving close harmony work. The caterpillar's lonesome shuffle blues at the opening of the second act also seemed pronounced with incongruous care for the languid, cabaret nature of the song (though crisp diction was a highlight of the performance as a whole).

Though colorfully manipulated by composer Hudson, the 10-piece chamber orchestra sometimes overpowered the singers, and the combined sonic weight of winds, strings, and four or more professional voices was heavy and acoustically "busy" for the moderate size of the Carle Museum's auditorium. Conductor Hangen's clear gestures kept the rhythmically complex score ticking along, but sadly free of reflective, expressive moments, which presented themselves in the music, but were not indulged.

All things considered, however, what better home could be found for "The Bug Opera" than the museum named for the creator of the 1969 children's classic "The Very Hungry Caterpillar?"

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