

NOTEWORTHY/Chestnut Hill LOCAL

by Michael Caruso for 11/25/2010

Germantown conductor Richard Raub led the world premiere performance of Margaret Garwood's *The Scarlet Letter* Friday night, November 19, in the Merriam Theater. The opera's libretto was written by the composer, herself, and based on the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne. It was commissioned by the Academy of Vocal Arts to celebrate its 75th anniversary.

The Scarlet Letter is a milestone on many counts. By marking 75 years of providing tuition-free training for professional singers at the Academy of Vocal Arts, the opera points to a level of accomplishment in America equaled only by AVA's center city neighbor, the Curtis Institute of Music, which is a decade older.

It's a milestone for Margaret Garwood, a local composer now in her 83rd year. There is nothing more daunting for a composer of any style of music than composing an opera, especially if you, yourself, are writing the libretto derived from a narrative work of literature most students still read in school. Merely writing the words and music, which is usually done by two individuals for a Broadway musical, is challenging, enough. But a composer of opera must also write all the orchestral parts, as well. Even Leonard Bernstein didn't score his masterpiece, *West Side Story*. That task was handled by others. Not so in opera. If it's your music, then you orchestrate it. It's a credit to Garwood's creative stamina that she wrote and composed the three-hour long *The Scarlet Letter*.

Hawthorne's original story tells the tale of Hester Prynne in 17th century Puritan Boston, a young woman who willingly succumbs to the Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale. The problem is that Hester is married, although her husband is presumed lost at sea. "Presumed" is the operative word, for until he's pronounced dead and gone, she's not a widow and, therefore, unavailable to Dimmesdale or any other man. The double whammy comes when Hester is "found with child" yet won't reveal the name of said child's father. Dimmesdale, of course, could come forward of his own accord, but his cowardice seals his lips. Hester, for her part, relishes keeping the secret to one degree or another. She submits to spending time in jail and then virtual banishment to the outer edges of town.

And then her husband returns, unrecognized by everyone save Hester. This Roger Chillingworth pressures her to keep secret his identity – which she does, all the while knowing that he's striving to uncover the father's identity. Suspecting Dimmesdale, Chillingworth attaches himself to the young clergyman as his doctor, slowly but surely undermining his spirit as the young man masochistically ravages his own body.

Needless to say, all does not turn out well. Hawthorne had a viciously grim and relentlessly heartless view of humanity. There's not an admirable (nor convincing) character in the novel and there's not a one in the opera, either. And yet, Garwood has managed to employ the magic of music to flesh out these obviously contrived constructions to transcend Hawthorne's negative

view of the human race in a way that elevates them to iconic status and, therefore, gives meaning to their lives for those of us who have come to know them on the operatic stage.

Garwood's score is firmly and a tad too safely rooted in traditional tonality. Samuel Barber's *Vanessa*, Marc Blitzstein's *Regina* and Carlyle Floyd's for *Susannah* are more adventuresome and edgy in a modern American sort of way. Yet Garwood's music unfolds organically and convincingly. It brims over with lyrical melody, lush harmony, evocative scoring, and dramatic urgency. It tells the opera's story above and beyond the labored meaning of its book. *The Scarlet Letter* has only one major flaw. Its ending is weak because it's accomplished through narration via supertitles rather than through singing. That's a theatrical cop-out. This is an opera, not a book. Garwood starts the opera with Hester on her deathbed, looking back over the past 40 years of her life. Garwood should bring Hester back to that deathbed for the final scene of *The Scarlet Letter*.

Friday evening's world premiere of *The Scarlet Letter* benefited mightily from a superb production. Germantown's Richard Raub conducted his accomplished cast of AVA students with magisterial command and sensitive expression. He obviously trusted his young charges to do right by the music, and they did. Corinne Winters was an affecting Hester, Zach Borichevsky was an appropriately infuriating Dimmesdale, and alumnus John Packard was a malevolent Chillingworth, with all the other smaller roles taken efficaciously. Raub was no less effective leading the AVA Opera Orchestra, drawing vibrant tones and surging rhythms to deepen and propel the action onstage. Especially heartening were the excellent acoustics of the Merriam Theater. Dorothy Danner's direction was concise and potent, Peter Harrison's sets caught the action's time and place, and Val Starr's costumes were worthy of both MGM and the Met put together.

Local opera lovers can only hope and pray for another 75 years from the Academy of Vocal Arts.