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OPERA REVIEW

## **OPERA REVIEW; On Life's List of Things to Do: Opera**

By KYLE GANN

"The first opera and the first litter of puppies should both be drowned," quipped some 19th-century operamonger whose name escapes me. It is awfully harsh on puppies, and it would be almost as harsh on Elliott Carter, who recently wrote his first opera at 90, a work that received its New York premiere on Sunday with the Chicago Symphony at Carnegie Hall.

Jauntily titled "What Next?," Mr. Carter's opera is a nonlinear, non-narrative grab bag of ideas couched in a conceit of six characters reeling from some never-specified catastrophe they have just survived together, like a Samuel Beckett play backward: "Recovering from Godot."

Mr. Carter has never been a theatrical composer, but rather a literary one. Having conceived this one-act, 45-minute comic piece, he secured for his librettist Paul Griffiths, who writes about music for The New York Times and is the author of several important books on the high-modernist music that Mr. Carter represents. Knowing his man, then, Mr. Griffiths provided a libretto bristling with alliteration, wordplay, philosophy and puns, and nearly devoid of action. Given in concert version, the resulting barely motivated acting was impossible to imagine in fuller staging. "What Next?" takes its place then in that peculiar repertory of brief, semistageable concept operas, like Schoenberg's "Gluckliche Hand."

Daniel Barenboim, who conducted, rendered the work a service by introducing, in a humorous monologue, the six singers one by one in character. These included an opera singer (sung thrillingly by Simone Nold) and her broadly clowning fiance (Hanno Muller-Brachmann); a hand-wringing mother (Lynne Dawson, in superbly full voice); an aging hippie (William Joyner); an astronomer named Stella (Hilary Summers); and a boy, sung expertly by 13-year-old Michael John Devine. It is difficult to guess how well the relationships among these characters would have been ascertained without Mr. Barenboim's prologue.

It is also difficult to know how some of the dialogue would have come across without supertitles. All singers exercised superb diction, but the libretto relied on homonyms easier to see than hear: the astronomer, for example, mistaking "serious" for "Sirius." Likewise, Mr. Carter's polyphony of words was in keeping with his counterpoint of rhythms, so that characters often sang over each other, obscuring even the libretto's best line: Stella, describing the universe, said, "It is as if designed for us, but not we for it."

"What Next?" itself did not seem designed for us, at least not for us to grasp in a theatrical context. It opened with a crash of percussion marking different tempos, reminiscent of Mr. Carter's Double Concerto of 1961, but with brake drums and trash can added to suggest a car crash. Examination of the score revealed many of Mr. Carter's trademark tempo clashes; as so often in his music, however, such subtleties

seemed swallowed up in performance even to the attentive ear.

There was one exception: if 90 percent of "What Next?" harked back to Mr. Carter's ultracomplex style of the 1960's and 70's, there was a wordless meditation in the very middle in which, for a couple of minutes, Grover Schiltz's English horn solo threaded its way through a lovely collage of pastel orchestral colors. The music returned afterward to an athletically angular vocal technique, a monochromatic sense of harmony and, to use words Mr. Carter once wrote in another context, "a lack of logic which repeated hearings can never clarify."

In a spectacular non sequitur of concert programming, Mr. Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony followed the opera with a complete rendering of Manuel de Falla's "Three-Cornered Hat," in which the orchestra's wind choirs were especially splendid.

Photo: Simone Nold and Hanno Muller-Brachmann with Daniel Barenboim in Elliott Carter's "What Next?" (Chris Lee for The New York Times)