



Vaughn Williams' 'Pilgrim's Progress' can't-miss for opera lovers

By Keith Powers / Contributing writer

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ORLEANS — With a sweeping, ambitious production that had many highlights and a few misses as well, the skilled singers and instrumentalists of Gloriam Dei Cantores joined forces with Elements Theatre Company on Friday evening at the Church of the Transfiguration in Orleans, for a staging of Ralph Vaughan Williams' "The Pilgrim's Progress."

The forces needed to present "Pilgrim's Progress" make it a stage rarity: more than 40 singing roles, a large chorus along with a children's chorus, multiple soloists and a complete orchestra.

GDC reconfigured its magnificent church sideways for the production, running a 100-foot video screen along one entire length. The video backdrop, created by Michael Counts and S. Katy Tucker, provided a breathtaking — sometimes overwhelmingly so — changing backdrop for the action.

Vaughan Williams was obsessed with John Bunyan's allegorical novel, which traces the challenges that Pilgrim faces on his journey toward salvation and the Celestial City. Bunyan's novel may now mostly be the subject of undergraduate survey courses, but many of his scenarios, the temptations of Vanity Fair or House Beautiful, for instance, have entered the popular lexicon.

Baritone Richard K. Pugsley sang the title role. James Jordan conducted the orchestra, and Danielle Dwyer directed the action. David Chalmers prepared the choruses.

Multiple soloists, most singing multiple roles, brought Vaughan Williams' (and Bunyan's) strange characters to life. Baritone Paul Scholten sang as Bunyan himself, who bookends the action with opening and closing arias; but also, and more notably, as Watchful, whose nocturne "I will lift up my hands," sung as he paced the stage back and forth, was a touching respite in the frequent tumult.

Soprano Eleni Calenos, both as the Branch Bearer and offstage as Voice of the Bird, sang with arresting lyric power. Tenor Aaron Sheehan — underutilized in this production — sang with humor and distinction as Mr. By-Ends.

The sprawling set — risers that filled the space in front of the outsized video screen — spread the action the length of the church. The configuration aided in depicting Pilgrim's journey, but more concision in the action would have helped the focus. For most scenes, there was no reason to occupy the entire 100-foot

length of the stage.

The video background was spectacular, a constantly shifting range of scenes from pastoral to urban to abstract. The pace of the changing visuals was sometimes too frenetic — a disconnect with some of the meditative, introspective moments — but overall, it was thrilling. Some images — the brutalist architecture of Pilgrim’s prison, for one — were stirring.

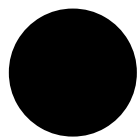
Vaughan Williams’ score has sublime moments; the highlight for the chorus comes during the trial at Vanity Fair, the most dynamic acting/singing/costuming scene in the entire production. And supporting that all (the orchestra played unseen behind the video backdrop) was some of Vaughan Williams’ most elegant, textured contrapuntal writing, the music a wash of Debussy-like impressions.

But the score also suffers from a lack of tempo variation. At times the action, following the music, seemed frozen.

Pugsley sang the lead role with precision, and often with insight. His prison aria, “Why have you forsaken me?” was touching, artistically complex. But often he was overwhelmed sonically by the instrumental ensemble. This happened immediately, in the opening scenes, and his words were inaudible.

Balance between sonic forces proved an overwhelming problem at times, and supertitles might have helped with audience comprehension. With the extraordinary number of singing roles, it could be expected that some parts were not filled by polished soloists.

A virtuoso voice in the lead role would have taken this production, still with many notable moments, over the top. But any staging of Vaughan Williams’ unique achievement — part opera, mostly theater, thoroughly musical — is a notable can’t-miss for opera lovers.



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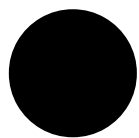
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