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Opera Finds Devil Feeling The Heat, Looking To Chill

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Hell hath three Furies, who assist Lucifer (baritone Michael Mayes) in the White Snake Projects production of Julian Wachner's new opera 'REV. 23.' (Photos by Kathy Wittman, Ball Square Films)

By **Keith Powers**

BOSTON – Hell just seems like it would be a lot more fun.

Like every depiction of the fiery pit since Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the hell in [Julian Wachner's](#) opera *REV. 23*, which premiered Sept. 29 at [John Hancock Hall](#) in Boston's Copley Square, holds a lot of appeal.

Just ask Adam and Eve.



Persephone (Colleen Daly) with Hades (Vale Rideout).

In a fanciful imagining of an unpublished final chapter of Revelation, where Lucifer and Hades make another attempt to infiltrate heaven and turn off the power, Wachner's *REV. 23* paints a picture of the frustrations of the devil, and his methods for tempting the peace-out, smiley-faced automatons who live up above.

Inspiration for *REV. 23* comes partly from video games, partly from farce, and partly from romance. It's highlighted by Wachner's inventive score, but seriously limited by a hackneyed libretto ([Cerise Lim Jacobs](#)), full of clunky idioms and grade-school rhymes.

[Lidiya Yankovskaya](#) conducted the chamber ensemble in the pit, the music providing a welcome respite from the sing-song lyrics. The movement onstage – by dancers and singers – was also intriguing and well conceived by director [Mark Streshinsky](#), making *REV. 23* far from a total loss.

Wachner's endlessly creative score moved with integrity and versatility among styles, not only rock, jazz, and bluesy settings, but affecting chamber music. Yankovskaya worked it assiduously, keeping a firm grip on the activities in the pit and the sometimes hectic action onstage. The opera played as one continuous act, almost two hours long.

The plot works something like this: Lucifer (baritone [Michael Mayes](#)) and Hades (a character, not just a place, sung by tenor [Vale Rideout](#)), plot to bring back winter. It's hot down there, after all.



Lucifer (Michael Mayes) and Hades (Vale Rideout) want to be cool.

Hades is also motivated by love: His Persephone (the lustrous soprano [Colleen Daly](#)), who can move freely between the two realms, has left him for heaven, mostly because of the climate.

Their plan centers around blowing up the almighty power plant, and they engage the comical – in a war-like way – Sun Tze (bass [David Cushing](#)) to strategize a takeover. They need to tempt Adam (tenor [Jonathan Blalock](#)) and Eve (terrific mezzo-soprano [Annie Rosen](#)) with apples and iPads and romantic literature.

Let that suffice for a summary. The story line, like the words that detail it, has no depth anyway. Hell is hot. Three Furies dress and act like pole dancers: that kind of hot. Heaven is cool, with its underwear-sporting airheads gazing off into the bliss. When Lucifer and Hades tempt the distance-gazers, it's easy pickings.

The effective set (designed by [Zane Pihlstrom](#), who did costumes as well) remains largely the same throughout. A luminous globe hangs center stage from the ceiling – alternately lit up as earth hanging in the balance or glowing ominously as the heavenly power source. Movable risers work well as shifting platforms for action and arias.

The singing was first rate. Mayes and Rideout were well suited to their roles. Mayes set a fiercely nasty tone from the opening bars. Superb countertenor [Michael Maniaci](#) – cast in the curious role of Archangel Michael, who fails spectacularly to defend heaven and somehow thinks that burning books will restore innocence – was unfortunately underused in this production. Cushing's bass-baritone was well employed as the supercilious Sun-Tze.



Archangel Michael (countertenor Michael Maniaci) tries to defend Heaven.

It was Colleen Daly's Persephone who had arias best suited to her lyric powers. Her "Blood Rubies," backed by a muted trumpet ([Sam Thurston](#)), set the mood for an elegant dance interlude. Her introductory aria, explaining her unique predicament, was actually touching.

A troupe of a dozen or so dancers filled out the ranks of the heaven dwellers, and their movement all evening, choreographed by former Boston Ballet soloist [Yury Yanowsky](#), was a highlight. The dancers transitioned easily between idioms, from dub to robotic to balletic, enhancing the action without drawing attention excessively to their own supporting role.

Costumes ranged from over-the-top, biker bad-boy leather (you can guess who that was) to tidy whiteys (another reason to avoid heaven). Fig leaves, cod pieces, and other naughty-bits coverings played a role in the plot, and in the humor. In fact, if this were a straight parody, the opera might have had more integrity. The times it did seem like a mock (or rock) opera – think Queen doing *Faust* – were the most successful.

But even the best music needs lyrics that move, explain, or envelop the action realistically. No matter how engaging the sound, when the Furies sing "Plant the fruit, all will go kaput," it's hard not to giggle with embarrassment.

Rosen, in Eve's aria "Beyond Paradise," proved the case. Singing lyrical art-song, with piano ([Julia Carey](#)) accompaniment, about her desire to see past the Happy Valley confines of heaven, she ended up going on and on with silly postulations. When the aria climaxes with her longing to see "where butterflies go to die" – well, that about sums up the intellectual complexity of this libretto.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow @PowersKeith.

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A MESSAGE FROM OUR PRESIDENT



John Fleming
MCANA President

Welcome to Classical Voice North America, the online journal of the Music Critics Association of North America, of which I was elected president in July. I have been a member of MCANA for 25 years, joining after I became performing arts critic of Florida's *St. Petersburg Times* (now the *Tampa Bay Times*).

I remember fondly the first MCANA annual meeting I attended, organized around the Lyric Opera of Chicago's 1992 premiere of *McTeague*, with score by William Bolcom. That meeting gave me – then new to music criticism – the invaluable opportunity to get acquainted with leading journalists in a specialized field. Many newspapers and magazines sent their staff critics, a far cry from the situation today when traditional print is severely stressed. Still, our meetings continue to be a great way to exchange ideas and hear top-notch performers together.

Under Barbara Jepson, my predecessor as president, and other MCANA leaders, CVNA was launched in September 2013 to provide a new outlet for classical music coverage. With readers in 90 countries it has shown consistent growth, recently passing half a million page views on 1,100 stories by 123 authors, the great majority of whom are members of MCANA.

This year saw the first annual MCANA Award for Best New Opera, which went to composer Missy Mazzoli and librettist Royce Vavrek for *Breaking*

the Waves, premiered by Opera Philadelphia. Click on an article about the award [here](#).

Thank you for reading CVNA, which seeks to convey the richness of musical life in North America and elsewhere, with reviews and commentary by expert MCANA members and occasional guest contributors. If you happen to be a writer with experience in classical music, please consider this an invitation to [join us](#).

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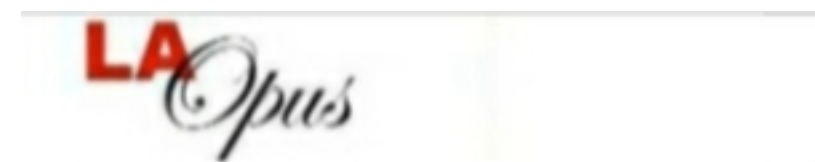
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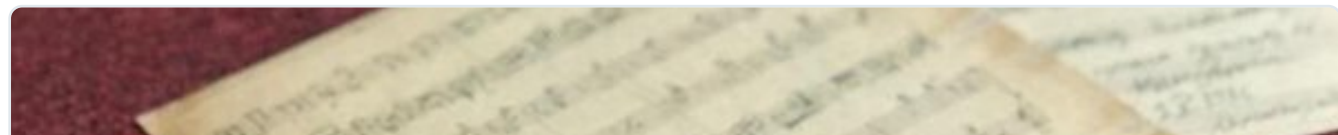


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9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
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