

Writing with an economy of means worth of the great man Anton Webern himself, Michael Dellaira and his excellent librettist J. D. McClatchy forge a compact opera based on musicologist Hans Moldenhauer's 1961 book *The Death of Webern: A Drama in Documents*. Commissioned by Pocket Opera Players, the world premiere took place in New York in 2013. The piece owes an (acknowledged) debt to Marco Capalbo's screenplay *Paths to Light*. This is the second collaboration between Dellaira and McClatchy (the first was *The Secret Agent*).

The circumstances of the death of Webern were shrouded in mystery. The composer's son-in-law, Benno Mattel, had been involved in black market activities; the "sting" was set up for that fateful evening, September 15, 1945. It is important to note that these events do not form the actual trajectory of the opera; rather, it is from the memories of the likes of Heiman and Murray, as well as via flashbacks, that the audience learns of the circumstances. The story is, instead, one of a musicological detective story, a kind of operatic cross between *CSI* and *The Last Hours of ...* (but without the autopsy). By writing for a chamber ensemble that is utilized with phenomenal economy, Dellaira sets up a rarefied and intense atmosphere in which the investigations and revelations can reveal themselves with maximal effect.

On his web site, Michael Dellaira states that "Today, Webern's music is rarely studied, talked about or played. (I recently met students from three major conservatories, none of whom had ever heard a note of his music.)" Can this really be true? If so, it is as shocking as it is depressing. Both universities I attended (in the 1980s, admittedly) saw Webern as fundamental to both composers' and analysts' training. And if true, one wonders how many listeners will pick up Dellaira's quotations? References to Webern's most famous work, the Passacaglia, op. 1, plus *Im Sommerwind* and *Satz für Klavier* are all weaved in. Dellaira's method of expression, while concise, is not generally directly Weberian in the sense of the true economy of that composer's music. Dellaira's techniques themselves are, however, consistently illuminating: The booklet notes rightly point to the use of canon when Moldenhauer and Heiman meet, each circling the other as they circle around an elusive truth. While Dellaira's expressive style can reference the Weberian, it can also include consonances, lyricism and even an aching sense of nostalgia.

The dark, oppressive atmosphere of the opening more than sets the scene: It states the expressive core of the opera. Repeated listening absolutely increases one's appreciation of Dellaira's score, as over time the instrumental lines begin to release their secrets and one really does begin to appreciate the taut construction. The small chamber "orchestra" (ensemble really, a mere seven players) is deployed with magnificent precision by the composer, and the players' sense of confidence in this performance is little short of remarkable.

As Moldenhauer, bass-baritone Kevin Short is magnificently assured as our guide through this particular musicological forest. Webern himself is taken by Tony Boutté, whose light, expressive tenor is so effective in the scene in which Webern writes what is effectively a begging letter to his publisher; he also shines in the sixth scene, in which Webern sets out his compositional philosophy ("Music is an idea governed by laws derived from Nature itself") before bemoaning the then-current state of music due to the Nazi's hate of culture. Here, the phrase "Arme Seelen" (Poor Souls) acts as a recurring cry, while the musical surface tributes the composer via its disjunct nature.

The short scene between Bell and the Officer (Chris O'Connor and Eric J. McConnell) is the perfect example of how the piece has been cast from strength—dramatically concise with the intensity perfectly conveyed—while the instrumental delicacy surrounding the entrance and subsequent solo scene with Paul Amadeus Pisk (McConnell again) is remarkable.

Worthy of particular note is the Helen Bell of Maria Fenty Denison. Fruity of voice and powerful, yet with a blissfully tasteful vibrato, Denison owns her scene late in the opera. She is especially associated with the works of Menotti and has sung in both *The Singing Child* (premiere) and *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (Mother) with that composer. Not many operas boast in their cast listings "Archivist I" and "Archivist II," but here they play a short but vital part in the story (both are exemplary). Perhaps only Adam Paul Cahill is slightly weak amongst the cast (as Commander George F. Lord), his scene (the eighth) a little lacking in dramatic confidence. Coming in late in the opera, the role of Murray is vital (he was the officer who had accompanied them to the fateful house that

September evening). Carl DuPont is firm of conviction and sings with a lyricism that underpins every statement; Dellaira's scoring for this scene (Scene 11) is particularly magical and pared down. The role of Amelie Walter (the eldest of Webern's three daughters) is well taken by Esther Jane Hardenbergh; Dellaira's music here again veers close to Webern's.

Expressive, intelligent, and superbly performed and recorded, this is the finest recent opera to have come my way in a long time. Encased in a sound world all of its own, yet clearly related to Webern in its concision, this is far more than an *homage*. The next step, of course, would be to actually see the opera, either live or via a DVD. **Colin Clarke**

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The circumstances of the death of Austrian composer Anton Webern are now quite well documented, but that was long not the case. It was only in 1960 that musicologist Hans Moldenhauer swept away the cobwebs obscuring the details of Webern's unfortunate demise at the hands (well, actually, the gun) of Raymond Bell, an American occupation soldier. Thus, librettist J. D. McClatchy incorporated an important role for the musicologist, who functions as a sort of narrator or commentator, detailing the research that he undertook on the matter. Consequently, the story unfolds in a series of flashbacks and recollections by the various participants, as queried by Moldenhauer. I found this approach made for an interesting and novel perspective, as I followed the libretto while listening to the work.

The plot of Michael Dellaira's opera, cast in 13 scenes, is centered on Moldenhauer's persistence in ascertaining exactly what had happened on that fateful night of September 15, 1945. His research led him to write numerous letters, most remaining unanswered, and personal visits to Raymond Bell's widow and to Webern's eldest daughter, Amalie Walter. His diligence, as revealed in the libretto (which seems faithful to the historical record), paid off with a precise chronology of events leading up to the death of the Austrian master.

The opera is scored with an accompaniment of a chamber ensemble that comprises flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass clarinet, violin, cello, percussion, and piano/organ. From these seemingly limited tonal resources, Dellaira draws an amazing amount of color through his imaginative scoring, such that at no time did I find myself wishing that he'd employed larger forces. Stylistically, the work opens dramatically in B Minor, leading me initially to assume I would be hearing a clone of Gian Carlo Menotti. Not long into the work, I realized that Dellaira actually possesses a truly individualistic style of composition that skillfully melds tonal and atonal elements. Webern's actual music is incorporated into the opera in several places, but it is so well done that it doesn't seem out of place in the least. Dellaira also proves himself to be a master at setting texts, knowing exactly which words to emphasize for both drama and clarity. He engages in numerous instances of word-painting, an instance of which occurs when Bach is mentioned, and is accompanied with chorale-like music in the organ and piano (albeit with updated harmonies). Another effective scene is the seventh, portraying the reception of letters Moldenhauer had written to the U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense, attempting to gain information from them. The responses of the State Department clerk, the military officer, and an archivist are all overlapping, effectively suggesting a *mélange* of inept governmental bureaucracy. I noted with amusement the end of the work on a C Major triad, something that would make Webern turn over in his grave. I also wondered if its ending a semitone higher than the opening tonality has significance. Those who know Wagner's *Ring* cycle might recall that the end of the saga is a semi-tone *lower* in its tonality from its extended Eb opening, suggesting to some scholars a depiction of the ultimate degradation of the gods.

All of the singers in this production acquit themselves well, and are enjoyable to listen to. Each has near-impeccable diction, such that the libretto is almost rendered superfluous. The stand-out for me is Kevin Short in the lead role of musicologist Hans Moldenhauer. His stentorian baritone voice captures all of the drama of the role he is creating in resplendent and elegant fashion.

This disc is a winner all around, as it contains the setting of a very interesting story underpinned by extremely well-written and effective music, good singing and instrumental playing, and a vivid recording from Albany. I can't imagine that opera lovers, or contemporary music aficionados, will want to let this one get by them. **David DeBoor Canfield**