

REVIEWS

Self-proclaimed Crabby Critic Calls New *Three Decembers* a Major Achievement

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I did not want to love Opera San José's new, designed-for-digital production of Jake Heggie's 2008 chamber opera, *Three Decembers*. The project starring Susan Graham went online Dec. 3, and will stream on demand through Dec. 31.

I entirely understand the hunger of companies and artists to get back to making music. But nine months into the Covid-19 pandemic, I am hungry too. I'm hungry for the real thing—actually sitting in an opera house with an audience watching live artists. I am heartily sick of pretending that watching opera on a TV, computer, or smart phone screen actually resembles that magical, in-person experience. Like a stressed-out nine-year-old, I'm crabby. Another stupid opera on another stupid screen?

Who cares?

Mere minutes into Opera San José's inventive, engrossing *Three Decembers*, I began to care. What I miss about live opera is the sensation of physically entering an entirely alternative universe—be it Figaro's nuptial bedroom or Wotan's Valhalla—when the lights go down and the curtain goes up. Somehow, Opera San José manages to create that experience, thanks to a cast of top-flight singers and the savvy collaboration of stage director Tara Branham and Silicon Valley's Flying Moose Pictures video production company.

The opera was staged and recorded under strict Covid-19 protocols, and we catch glimpses of those limitations during the video. The company's Resident Artist conductor Christopher James Ray transformed Heggie's score into a prickly, color-filled arrangement for two pianos. When the camera turns to the indefatigable pianists, Veronika Agranov-Dafoe and Sunny Yoon, we see them wearing masks and separated by Plexiglas panels. Ray conducts behind a similar panel.

With Heggie's expressive score and Gene Scheer's seamlessly crafted libretto, *Three Decembers* is the tale of an alienated family trying to salve its wounds over three decades. Opera San José's superb cast--Susan Graham as acclaimed theater star Madeline Mitchell, soprano Maya Kherani and baritone Efraín Solís as Maddie's grown children, Beatrice and Charlie—propels us straight into the heart of each character's struggle.

Perfect timing

It's an intimate story, and the staging, with sets by Steven C. Kemp, feels especially appropriate in these Covid-19 days when we interact with other people mostly as tiles on a Zoom call. We often see the three characters onstage at once, each in a tight, singular setting—Maddie in her dressing room, Charlie on his small, stiff-backed sofa, Bea in her kitchen on the phone with Charlie--commiserating over their mother's most recent, typically self-centered annual Christmas letter. Their lives are separate but achingly intertwined.

The audio is clear and sumptuous, the camera work is subtly deft. We're rarely aware of the camera's movement, but it always seems to be in the right place at the right time. Whether through close-ups or full-length shots, the camera reveals the human emotions so beautifully expressed in Heggie's score. Bea's final, rage-filled explosion tears at our heart. Graham's Maddie is alternately an entitled star, a formidable Amazon railing against ungrateful children, and a beleaguered artist, well aware that her hunger for fame has seriously injured her children.

With his warm, flexible baritone and good looks, Solís's Charlie is especially compelling. Grief-stricken when his long-time partner dies of AIDS, he is the picture of youthful, bewildered sorrow. In one shot, an overhead camera looks down on his curled-up body. He is small and helpless, the very essence of humanity under siege. The shot tells us something valuable about a world in the time of AIDS, Covid-19, or whatever other woe the future might bring. It's an image I can't get out of my head.

Which means that opera on screen, done this well, can be every bit as riveting as a live performance in a physical opera house. Maybe my crabby-nine-year-old self had it wrong. Opera San José put their excellent artists to work and, at the same time, pushed operatic boundaries in daring, new directions. The company's staff and the patrons who underwrote this ambitious production should be proud of themselves. This digital *Three Decembers* is a major achievement.