

'The Golden Gate' as Opera

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NEW YORK -- Vikram Seth's 1986 novel about the lives, careers, loves and tragedies of contemporaneous young San Franciscans, "The Golden Gate," has a feature that dramatically sets it apart from other tales of the young. It is in verse, based in stanzas and rhyme scheme on Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin," with the kind of authorial intervention and inventive sport suggested by Byron's "Don Juan."

Composer Conrad Cummings has long admired the novel, and for the last few years has been working turning it into an opera. On Jan. 16, in the Rose Studio of Lincoln Center, American Opera Projects, in association with LivelyWorks, presented a workshop production, directed by John Henry Davis and conducted by Steven Osgood, with the indomitable Charity Wicks at the piano.

Since the opera by its nature greatly reduces the scope of the novel, the main stories, of a small group of young San Franciscans existing in the shadow of The Golden Gate, are even more central. One difficulty is that Seth everywhere intervenes in his story, with asides, philosophical commentary and the like. In addressing that, Cummings has his five singing roles (one child only speaks) step out of character and act as a Greek chorus, giving information and commentary. Thus the six characters are in constant motion in the many short scenes that collectively tell the tale.

Insofar as there is one center it is John, an uptight yuppie who links himself first to Liz, an upscale lawyer with a big firm, and then, when she rejects him, to his old flame Jan, an Asian American who is a sculptor and rock-band drummer. Her death in an automobile accident is devastating

to John, but by opera's end he is reaching out to Liz and her husband Phil, John's ex-college roommate whom he has previously shunned as having betrayed him. The subplots involve Phil and his son Paul, whose wife has divorced him and who has briefly taken up with Liz's brother Ed. Musically, the unfolding of the opera is comparable to a divertissement set of dances, weaving in and out of each other and combining to give a picture, however compressed from the novel, of San Francisco in the 1980s.

As a composer, Cummings could be termed a faux-naïf, whose deceptively simple music-making (akin to but quite different from that of Virgil Thomson) masks a fine sense of musical characterization and a depth of feeling. The music itself is sinuous and fluid, moving from a single line of melody to chordal sections to a sort of pattern-music of repeated short blocks of notes -- always in movement and always responsive to the text. (He is also not averse to planting sly musical in-jokes.) Cummings has always had a gift for opera, and his vocal line is not only eminently singable but effective in giving the accompaniment a feeling of being complimentary rather than at odds with the voices. And, like all good opera composers, his music-making keeps the dramatic impetus moving. Cummings' type of studied simplicity however is no end in itself: it can rise to powerful moments within the score, as in several of the love duets (e.g., Ed/ Phil, John/ Jan), and can illuminate the difficult scenes of Phil's growing love for Liz and she for him (it was originally a loveless match). Certainly John's threnody for Jan, "She died alone," is the vocal centerpiece of the opera, although it never dominates the texture of the rest of the work.

The cast was particularly well-chosen. David Adam Moore made a strong impression as John, being properly obnoxious in his yuppie mode and yet enormously sympathetic (as he must be if the ending of the opera is to work), and Kevin Burdette as Phil well suggested the loving, yet confused, nature of the role. The women, Katrina Thurman as Liz and Hai-Ting Chinn as Jan, and Keith Jameson as the also-conflicted (with religion) Ed, contributed to the overall ensemble feeling of the workshop, with Elliot Kahn carrying off his speaking role with aplomb.

"The Golden Gate" may revolve around a group of people growing up in San Francisco in the 1980s, and may indeed smack of the cliché of that city, the young and the restless. But it is evident that Cummings, in

selecting this novel for musicalization, intends far more. The two acts both end with an invocation of the Golden Gate Bridge, and it is this expansion of vision from the particular to the universal that signals the opera as being a paean to the City on the Bay.

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