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MUSIC REVIEW | 'THE GOLDEN GATE'

Staying True to Novel's Vigor

By STEVE SMITH
Published: January 17, 2010

Inspired by reading Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin," the Indian writer Vikram Seth achieved an unlikely alchemy in his 1986 debut novel, "The Golden Gate," detailing the intermingled intimacies of five contemporary San Franciscans in their 20s with stately rhymed sonnets. In creating an [opera](#) based on Mr. Seth's novel, the composer Conrad Cummings has fashioned an equally improbable fusion: lithe melodic lines that flow and entwine in the manner of [Monteverdi](#), peppered with musical references to [Henry Mancini](#) and the punk band Black Flag.



Rachel Papo for The New York Times
"The Golden Gate": David Adam Moore and Katrina Thurman in the Rose Studio at Lincoln Center.

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Mr. Cummings, who was born in San Francisco and now teaches in the evening division of the [Juilliard School](#), has been working on "The Golden Gate" for several years, a process discussed in reports on his Web site ([conradcumplings.com](#)). American Opera Projects, which selected "The Golden Gate" for development in 2006, mounted its first complete performance on Saturday night in the Rose Studio at [Lincoln Center](#), with a semi-staged presentation directed by John Henry Davis and conducted by Steven Osgood.

In adapting the libretto from Mr. Seth's text, Mr. Cummings has maintained the rhythmic verve of his source while gently pruning its thickets of topical chattiness for greater dramatic flow. The most notable departure is the opera's ending: a variation on the opening scene that provides a final ensemble tableau.

In the process some of Mr. Seth's rich literary allusions are sacrificed. But Mr. Cummings compensates with his own sly nods: a character growls his distaste for Schoenberg's music in gnarled dissonances; a singles-bar scene romps to the melodic riff from Michael Jackson's "Beat It." Those cues enrich Mr. Cummings's clear, appealing score without overpowering or derailing it.

The singers — Katrina Thurman, a soprano; Hai-Ting Chinn, a mezzo-soprano; Keith Jameson, a tenor; David Adam Moore, a baritone; and Kevin Burdette, a bass — offered rich, engaged performances. Constantly shifting between firsthand declamation and third-person observation, they achieved a gabby intensity more often encountered in

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Elliot Kahn, an 11-year-old actor, was admirable in a speaking role. Mr. Cummings has yet to orchestrate his opera, but the pianist Charity Wicks played with copious energy and nuance here.

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A version of this article appeared in print on January 18, 2010, on page C2 of the New York edition.



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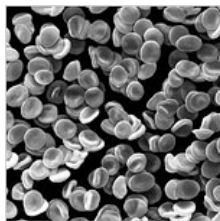
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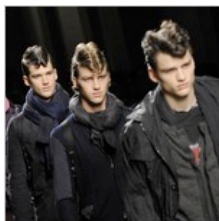


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