

Who Is Sylvia?

by JUDY GELMAN MYERS on Apr 7, 2013 • 12:49 pm

Julia Adolphe's psychological opera floats Bargemusic

For fifty-two weeks a year, four days a week, New Yorkers can find chamber music in all its forms—early, canonical, and contemporary—right under the Brooklyn Bridge. There, Bargemusic offers 220 concerts annually, even tendering weekly free tickets to groups and one free concert monthly in order to reach as many music lovers as possible.



Normally Bargemusic presents chamber music, recitals, and quartets in their coffee-barge-turned-intimate-concert-hall, but on March 21 and 22, as part of their contemporary composers series, they took the unusual step of mounting an opera: *Sylvia*, a chamber opera in one act, for four voices and three instrumentalists. Based on the true story of a 13-year-old girl who is coerced by a friend of her parents' into having an affair with him, the opera depicts the psychotherapy that ultimately brings Sylvia to psychic and emotional health.

Mounted in concert form, *Sylvia* was one year in production before making its world premiere at Bargemusic. Simple but striking staging enhanced the inherent drama of a young girl on the verge of womanhood who is grappling not only with her own sexuality but also with the psychological responsibility of being a second-generation Holocaust survivor: her seducer, like her parents, was born to parents who had survived the camps. Sylvia understands his pain; with the empathetic tenderness of youth, she wants to ease his suffering. With great clarity, composer and librettist Julia Adolphe encapsulates Sylvia's dilemma in a plaintive cry: "What was it you needed? What did you think a thirteen-year-old girl would know?"

Much of Sylvia's seduction was played out at a Passover seder, so Adolphe incorporates a creepy Hebrew rendition of the first of the four questions, Why is this night different from all other nights? In one of the opera's highlights, Sylvia sings her own response over the traditional, albeit altered, chant: "On this night I am different. I am disgusting. I thought I could give him freedom, so I became his slave. Oh God, pass over this house: There's blood on the door."

With a degree in literary theory as well as multiple degrees in music composition, Adolphe shapes her musical phrases to emphasize the linguistic, rather than musical, content of words. Concomitantly, she employs the timbre of her instruments—clarinet, sax, cello, and piano—to bring out the interiority of Sylvia's torment and ultimate redemption.

Tags: Judy Gelman Myers, Julia Adolphe

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