

UCSB Department of Music West Coast Premiere - January 30, February 1, 2015

Joel Feigin's Opera *Twelfth Night* — A Magical Masterpiece

American composer Joel Feigin has experienced the long march living composers travel in pursuit of second performances. His charming, box office-friendly opera, *Twelfth Night*, after its chamber version premiere in 2005 at Long Leaf Opera in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, languished nearly 15 years before the composer's revised score was presented in a partially staged

DANIEL KEPL
OPERA REVIEW

production by the Opera Theatre of DePaul University School of Music in Chicago last November. UC Santa Barbara's fully staged West Coast premiere of the work on January 30th and February 1st at Lotte Lehmann Concert Hall on the California version of the Illyrian coast, gave definitive witness, buttressed by ecstatic audience response, both in Chicago and Santa Barbara, this work has powerful legs.

Twelfth Night's plot is one of perhaps half a dozen comedic formulas popular from Shakespeare's time to the present: shipwreck as metaphor and plot scrambler; twins lost, then found; true love buffeted by conspiracy, misunderstanding, and deliberate obfuscation, finally sorted out happily at the eleventh hour. Act I raced by like a greyhound on the loose at both UCSB performances, leaving the audience eager to take a quick break and get back into the theatre for more. A good sign. Act II, which brought loose ends together and concluded with a splendidly Mozartean ensemble set and postlude, was also timed to perfection, and brought audiences at both Santa Barbara performances spontaneously to their feet in salute.

Feigin's magical score is key to that exuberant response. Both sophisticated and playful, it pays subtle quasi-motivic homage to several opera composers of the past 300 years, each marinated in a distinctly Feiginesque harmonic sauce. Composed in the neoclassic nomenclature of Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress*, with nods to Mozart (pithy vocal ensembles), Richard Strauss (bravura coloratura arias), Wagner (Feigin's magnificent command of orchestration, especially his intoxicating use of French horn and woodwind riffs), with additional harmonic references to Mendelssohn (the opening chords of the opera), as well as Mahler and Britten, *Twelfth Night* stretched historic imagination as well as the technical capabilities of UCSB's young singers and orchestra. Everyone involved clearly revelled in the opportunity.

Having seen both UCSB performances - I was not alone in wanting to experience this glittering masterpiece

a second time - there is but one piece of advice to pass along to opera producers around the world: book this fresh and artistically satisfying opera at your earliest opportunity. It's a sleeper that deserves to be in the repertory of major opera houses.

Twelfth Night is clearly the most ambitious collaborative venture undertaken by UCSB Voice Program Area Head, tenor Benjamin Brecher, since his appointment in 2008. There have been other fabulous opera productions at UCSB (Copland's *The Tender Land* comes to mind), but Feigin's *Twelfth Night* demands particularly focused vocal prowess and orchestral grit. The UCSB Opera Theatre cast rose to the occasion admirably, finessed by spirited and energetic playing from the orchestra. Director David Grabarkewitz, former Resident Director at New York City Opera, now Executive Director for El Paso Opera, kept the stage action buzzing with clever blocking and meticulously choreographed sight-to-sound gags, which Feigin has sprinkled generously throughout the score. Grabarkewitz' efforts were amply rewarded by a cast whose acting was as dynamic as was their singing.

An indispensable collaborative guest artist for this production, conductor Brent Wilson, in his fifth season as Assistant Conductor and Chorus Master at Opera Santa Barbara, shepherded a clean and transparent reading of the score that danced and sparkled generously. Wilson's sensitive conducting also allowed time and space for his singers to fully express tenderness and longing amid the silly plot mayhem, a necessary virtue, considering Shakespeare's gorgeous words and Feigin's penchant for beautiful melody. Speaking about the difficulty of adapting words to music during a recent interview, the composer explained the compositional conundrum in opera: it takes four times as long to express a word in music as to speak it. Feigin's *Twelfth Night* libretto was the more electrifying for his intelligently judicious and loving paring of Shakespeare's script.

Skip Stecker made imaginative use of simple devices in his set and lighting scheme, centering the action around a gossamer Maypole of draping fabrics on Lehmann Concert Hall's modest stage that, when shifted by cast members from time to time, created the illusion of set and mood change. Costume Designer Lise Lange draped the cast in colorful Enlightenment raiment.

Tenor Adam Bradley, pursuing his MM in Vocal Performance at UCSB, sang the often difficult soaring lyric tessitura of his character, Sebastian, with admirable technical skill and vocal acumen. Mezzo soprano Molly Clementz,



Left to right: baritone **Tyler Reece** (Malvolio), mezzo soprano **Molly Clementz** (Viola), baritone **Christopher Edwards** (Feste, The Fool), and lyric soprano **Colleen Beucher** (Olivia)/photo by **David Bazemore**

a member of the MM/DMA program at UCSB, demonstrated her solid, often hugely resonant instrument to good advantage as Sebastian's twin, the pants role of Viola. UCSB graduate (MM) now living and studying in Cincinnati, lyric soprano Colleen Beucher, was in excellent voice for both performances, particularly in the duet with Clementz, *Make Me A Willow Cabin*, one of several gorgeous arias in the opera.

Vocal Performance major, baritone Christopher Edwards, who is finishing his Bachelors in Music at UCSB, achieved a stirring theatrical and vocal froth as Feste, The Fool, manipulating the opera's plot progress skillfully toward its eventual denouement. Baritone Tyler Reece, a first year MM/DMA student at UCSB, managed his comic role as Malvolio with good grace and spectacular voice. Tenor Aaron Gallington (Count Orsino) is pursuing his MM at UCSB and turned in an impressive realization of his role, particularly the lovely aria, *If Music Be the Seat of Love*. A



talented secondary cast included UCSB Doctoral graduate, bass Emil Cristescu (Antonio) and baritone Mark Covey, who is on a professional singing career path anchored for now, at Princeton. Both were convincing vocally and theatrically, especially Covey, for his dual roles as Fabian and Captain. UCSB Doctoral candidate, bass Luvi Avendano (Sir Toby Belch), soprano Aislinn Burnett (Maria), and tenor Evan Schindler (Sir Andrew Aguecheek), led an excellent supporting cast and chorus.

Daniel Kepl has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews for newspapers in Santa Barbara, Tacoma, and Seattle since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor. He will conduct the Emeriti Philharmonic Orchestra during its tour of Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina in September 2016.

To watch Daniel Kepl's video interviews with California's diverse arts community visit www.bravocalifornia.com