

# OPERA NEWS

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## *The Turn of the Screw*

**EUGENE, OR**

**Eugene Opera**

**10/30/15**

**EUGENE OPERA THIS SEASON** expands from two to four productions by adding two in the Hult Center's 496-seat Soreng Theater to the usual two in the Hult's 2,448-seat Silva Concert Hall. The first in the smaller space, on Halloween weekend, could not have been more apt—*The Turn of the Screw* (seen Oct. 30), Benjamin Britten's haunting chamber opera. The second, in May 2016, will be Mark Adamo's *Little Women*.

The Soreng, asymmetrical with three levels plus three one-row tiers on one side, has a not-small fifty-foot proscenium stage but no pit. Britten's thirteen-member orchestra was bunched tightly at stage left, leaving seventy percent of the stage open for the action, which also spilled into the two orchestra-level aisles. Watching the musicians play Britten's brilliant variations-form interludes between scenes raised the orchestral music's profile and was a treat in itself: one thrilled to see the strings' fleet pizzicato playing and the percussionist striking the tubular bells. Michael Sakir's conducting was cohesive, brisk and clear, much like Britten's on his recording. The Soreng acoustic, neither particularly resonant nor dry, sounded satisfactory and true from rear orchestra level.

The spare staging by Mark Beudert, Eugene Opera's general director, required little more than chairs, a bench that doubled as a bed, a keyboard instrument, and eerie light on black curtains at the back. The beginning was inauspicious, singers sitting with scores as if at a musical rehearsal; the tenor known as the Prologue rose and pointed out the others as he narrated; then the theme (of the fifteen variations to come) sounded, and chairs and scores were gone. The audience did not see Peter Quint when the Governess saw him on the tower or through the window, so it was easy to think that she might be imagining things.

But in Act II, Quint, assisted by Miss Jessel, took over as head stagehand and director, setting props and manipulating events. In the church scene, Quint and Miss Jessel shadowed Miles and Flora up one aisle and led them down the other. Like a mimic playing a violin to mock another's sob story, Quint at the keyboard accompanied Miss Jessel's "Here my tragedy began"; there's a harp if no keyboard in the orchestra there, but it stole thunder from Miles's later virtuoso piano scene using the same prop. Quint and Miss Jessel set out pen and paper for the Governess to write her employer; why would they encourage her to do that?

Tenor Brendan Tuohy, singing superbly as the Prologue and Peter Quint, was the vocal standout; if his Quint wasn't especially sinister, the charm and handsome tone made it easy to believe that he "had his will morning and night." Soprano Laura Wayte, phrasing and inflecting eloquently with a slender instrument, her lines lingering in the memory, was a sympathetic, sane Governess with the ability to draw listeners to her rather than push to reach them. Hard-to-cast Miles was sung by college-undergrad soprano Carolyn Quick, whose pure timbre was such that anyone blindfolded would have taken her for a precocious boy treble. Soprano Emily Way, not much older, was a lovely, lively, girlish Flora of well-focused tone. Tess Altiveros lavished a ripe, sensual lyric soprano on Miss Jessel. Mezzo Beth Madsen Bradford's formidable Mrs. Grose was powerfully if sometimes coarsely voiced. This was canny casting: none of the women could have been mistaken for another.

With singers and musicians to watch, the lack of supertitles was a relief and a blessing. For once, one could feel an audience really listening, hanging on every word. Most of the words came through from sopranos and mezzo, and they all did from tenor Tuohy. For the final face-off among the Governess, Miles and Quint, there was utter silence from a gripped audience. —*Mark Mandel*

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