

Schreker's opera 'Distant Sound' heard at Bard

By MIKE SILVERMAN, For The Associated Press Mike Silverman, For The Associated Press – Sat Jul 31, 12:58 pm ET

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. – His name is all but forgotten today, but a century ago Franz Schreker was considered perhaps the most important operatic composer since Richard Wagner. Now Leon Botstein, an energetic excavator of neglected music, has brought Schreker's 1912 "Der Ferne Klang" ("The Distant Sound") to the campus of Bard College for its first fully staged production in the U.S. Friday night's premiere, played superbly by the American Symphony Orchestra with Botstein conducting, revealed a richly inventive work, full of lush melodies and dissonant harmonies, sometimes suggestive of Richard Strauss.

Schreker wrote his own libretto, a feverish tale of a penniless young composer, Fritz, who abandons his sweetheart, Grete, to pursue an elusive "sound," while she drifts into prostitution. Although they are reunited, he dies as the curtain falls — a twist on the usual operatic scenario where it's the heroine who succumbs.

There are fine solos for the main characters and lovely orchestral interludes. But the highlight is the second act, set in a Venetian bordello, where Schreker introduces competing textures that include soloists and orchestra, a full chorus, a gypsy band and a gondoliers' serenade.

Botstein arrayed his forces to give this tour de force a visual equivalent: The orchestra in the pit is joined by three smaller bands — one in a box to stage left, another stage right and one on a raised platform behind the stage — to create a highly disciplined cacophony.

Director Thaddeus Strassberger updated the action to the period from the end of World War I to the time of Schreker's own death in 1934, making it a commentary on the decline of a troubled society.

Some effects worked well, like the second-act scene when Fritz encounters Grete after 10 years. Initially not realizing he is in a bordello, he sings a long solo about his love. But instead of looking at her directly, he gazes at her reflection in a series of mirrors, underscoring the illusion that is soon to be shattered. Other staging choices seemed dubious, like resetting a moonlit lake scene at a movie theater, where Grete (and, much to our distraction, the audience) watches silent films and newsreels.

The leading roles call for voices of Wagnerian size and stamina.

Soprano Yamina Maamar as Grete mustered some impressive top notes, but her singing was marred by a harsh, wobbly sound. Tenor Mathias Schulz struggled from the outset with Fritz's vocal line and ran out of steam before the end. Among the good supporting cast, baritones Jeff Mattsey and Corey McKern stood out as, respectively, the Hack Actor and the Count.

The half-Jewish, Austrian composer's success lasted through the 1920's, but the Nazis banned his music, and he died a broken man. Now, thanks to recent productions in Europe and Botstein's efforts, at least one of his works is reclaiming a place in the repertory.

The opera is being performed as part of Bard's SummerScape festival, this year exploring the music of Alban Berg, who was influenced by Schreker. Additional performances are scheduled for Aug. 1, 4 and 6.
___ Online: <http://fishercenter.bard.edu/summerscape/2010/>