

Opera: An Adaptation Of Massenet's 'Cendrillon'

By Bernard Holland

Jan. 17, 1988



See the article in its original context from
January 17, 1988, Section 1, Page 52 [Buy Reprints](#)

New York Times subscribers* enjoy full access to
TimesMachine—view over 150 years of New
York Times journalism, as it originally appeared.

SUBSCRIBE

*Does not include Crossword-only or
Cooking-only subscribers.

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems; we are continuing to work to improve these archived versions.

ADVERTISEMENTS for the Music-Theater Group's "Cinderella/ Cendrillon" at St. Clement's Church on Thursday night were enough to chill the opera lover's spine. A "retelling" of the Cinderella story with "a modern sensibility," they promised. ("Retelling" plus "modern" in small American opera companies usually means "vulgarization.") Selective editing, adaptation and additions to Massenet's little-known opera were also announced (for these three processes, read in most cases "perversion and destruction.") The production - shared by Anne Bogart, Jeff Halpern and Eve Ensler -began with yet another scarcely tenable position: dialogue in English, singing in the original French.

The rest of this review must devote itself to figuring out why it all worked so well. Thoughtfulness and sheer quality come immediately to mind -characteristics that make theories seem less important. Preparation in particular: music and stage were not a haphazard partnership but part of the same process. More important, I think, was this production's inventive approach to reconciling musical time with the "real" time of characters on stage.

Music - with its need to repeat ideas - moves more slowly than words, at least slower than action expressed by words. Miss Bogart's solution has been a kind of choreography, in which stylized, highly organized movement by every participant on stage teeters on the edge of full-fledged ballet and often tumbles into it. There seems to have been a conscious decision here to let music dictate drama, and the subservience of the latter - action as illustrated rhythm, musical curve and mood -actually fortifies it. The whole process is intelligently carried out.

There was no help for the juxtaposition of languages when the spoken and the sung alternated in short bursts. An obvious solution would have been an all-English text, but Mr. Halpern, who conducted a tiny band of six including himself at the piano, was perhaps loath to upset the confluence of French intonation to Massenet's melodic writing. English made more sense in the central monologues of this play that, with a minimum of pretention, explored the twisting emotions of the heroine's dual personalities. Cinderella here is two

characters - Lucette cringing at the hearth, Cendrillon dancing at the ball. The two attempt suicide facing each other, mirror-like. It is an example of how a fairy tale can be made to deepen and assume weight without floating away through inflated symbolism.

The singing alternated between big operatic voices - Joyce Castle's Mme. de la Haltiere and Elisabeth Van Ingen as the Fairy Godmother -and fainter-sounding, more Broadway-like techniques. Henry Stram as Pandolfe was an example of the latter, with Allison DeSalvo and Theresa McCarthy (as the sisters, Noemie and Dorothee) and Joan Elizabeth (Lucette) hovering between the two extremes. Miss Castle was forceful while Miss Van Ingen showed a handsome soprano and a very decent trill. Lauren Flanigan's big soprano in the role of Cendrillon was passionate almost to a fault, and Jeffrey Reynolds sang the Prince's part with a healthy, promising young tenor that, with care, could grow in smoothness and flexibility.

St. Clement's proscenium (this production offers two smaller proscenia retreating toward the back of the stage) is actually more generous in size than the audience space, which seats about 100. The church's smallness has a pleasing symmetry when matched to this kind of quasi-chamber enterprise. The musicians were on stage but recessed into the wings - visible both to the audience and (happily) to the performers. There was room for everyone and everything.

The careful lighting was by Carol Mullins, the simple yet elegant sets by Victoria Petrovich. Gregg Barnes and Ann Emo conceived the costumes.