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Vanessa, Santa Fe Opera — review: ‘An engrossing production’

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Virginie Verrez as Erika. Photo: Ken Howard

Samuel Barber’s *Vanessa* is the kind of work that gives opera plots a bad name. The title character nervously awaits the arrival of her lover, Anatol, whom she has not seen for 20 years but expects for dinner every night. The Baroness (her mother) and Erika (her niece) can do nothing about her behaviour, but then they’re as strange as she is. When Anatol’s son, also named Anatol, shows up, he arouses romantic feelings in both Vanessa and Erika (not to mention audience suspicions of incest).

Still, the late critic Andrew Porter wrote that *Vanessa*, which had its premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in 1958, has “a slightly less awful libretto than it seems”. In its favour is the music, in which Puccini-like lyricism coexists with 1950s modernism. In light of such irresistible numbers as the gorgeous final quintet and the morbid fascination exerted by the awfulness of the libretto (by Barber’s partner Gian Carlo Menotti, his only such effort not joined to his own music), it’s small wonder *Vanessa* has a cult following.

It receives here an engrossing production by James Robinson that draws parallels to *film noir*. Allen Moyer's wintry grey set depicts the family's drawing room but undergoes transformations to show outdoor scenes and the house's grand staircase. In a striking cinematic moment, Erika descends the staircase just as the family Doctor announces to guests the engagement of Vanessa and young Anatol, when suddenly his words are obliterated by an orchestral eruption representing the pit Erika feels in her stomach.

Erin Wall brings vocal and dramatic flair to Vanessa, aptly conveying the upturn in her spirits after winning Anatol's affections. Helene Schneiderman does well as the laconic Baroness, but a fresher, smoother sound than that mustered by Virginie Verrez is needed for Erika. Zach Borichevsky's tenor voice has a seductive ring that suits Anatol, and the veteran James Morris sings warmly as the avuncular Doctor. Leonard Slatkin, a conductor well versed in postwar American styles, leads an accomplished performance. Still, one left feeling the experience was a rather hollow one.



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