

The Cultural Tourist

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DIALOGUES OF THE CARMELITES

Sunday afternoon my friend Meg Mundy invited me to join her for a Juilliard School performance of Francis Poulenc's "Dialogues of the Carmelites." We are so besotted with choices in New York that sometimes we can't do all we want. I have always been an admirer of the French composer who flourished from the '20s through the '50s. His work was always accessible, which meant he was out of fashion for many years. I have always been struck by how unmistakable his style was -- you do not need to hear more than four measures of any piece to know it is Poulenc, a voice direct and simple on the one hand, but on the other deeply poetic and moving.

In 1977 John Dexter mounted a memorable production of his 1956 opera "Dialogues of the Carmelites" during his brief reign at the Met. It was quite shattering. (I also remember it because the night we went there was a bomb scare. When we arrived the Met audience was standing on on the Plaza waiting to get in -- among the operagoers that night was Barry Bostwick. When we got inside everything was handled so smoothly you would have thought bomb scares were part of the routine.)

One of the roles that night was taken by Regine Crespin, a great singing actress. When you saw her perform you did not think you were in an opera house, You felt music was the only way whatever character she played -- and I was lucky enough to see her as Berlioz's Dido and Strauss's Marschallin -- could fully express herself.

I had noticed that Juilliard was doing "Carmelites," but foolishly thought I would catch it the next time around. Fortunately Meg had greater foresight. When it was over we agreed it was one of the most thrilling musical experiences either of us had ever had.

The plot, based on a work by George Bernanos, a 20th century Jansenist, concerns an order of nuns during the Reign of Terror. At the end of the opera they are condemned to death by the Revolutionary Tribunals for (need I say?) imaginary crimes against the Revolution. In the final scene they march toward the guillotine. Dexter had them proceed upstage, their backs to us, though he had one touching detail -- a priest in disguise amidst the crowd blessed them as they marched toward their deaths.

Fabrizio Melano, who saw the original production in Paris 54 years ago, directed this one. Everything about his work was impeccable but the staging of the final scene is one of the most powerful things I have ever seen. The nuns came toward us, and instead of marching stoically they often crumbled in literally mortal fear. The offstage sound of the guillotine is always effective. Here the whole thing was overwhelming, certainly because the young singers handled their assignments so consummately.

Meg's seats were in the very front row. So the rich, brilliant sounds of the orchestra could not have been more immediate. The performance was conducted by Anne Manson, who conveyed the drama and tenderness of Poulenc's work magnificently.

Donald Eastman's sets were spare but perfect. A cross he designed for the convent, displayed at an odd angle, was simply fabulous.

There has been much talk in recent months about the direction of opera production. Much of it has been specious, focusing on innovation, which, as we have seen too often across 65th Street, has highlighted the supposed cleverness of the stage director. Here the production was in every way at the service of the great score. I hope Peter Gelb had a chance to see it.