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SPONSORED BY**April 23, 2010****MUSIC REVIEW**

## **Trooping to the Guillotine, in Martyrdom**

**By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)**

For the students in the [Juilliard School](#)'s vocal arts program, works like Poulenc's wrenching "Dialogues des Carmélites," which the Juilliard [Opera](#) is now presenting at the Peter Jay Sharp Theater, are a crucial counterweight to centerpieces of the operatic canon. The enduring 19th-century bread-and-butter works teach young singers that melodic beauty and vocal virtuosity are paramount values, and that in tragic repertory, oceans of larger-than-life emotion can be wrung from stories of star-crossed love and family politics. But "Dialogues" is a reminder that opera can deal with deeper conflicts too.

The opera, based on a play by Georges Bernanos about the guillotining of Carmelite nuns during the French Revolution, explores the notion of steadfast faith in a brutally secular world. Poulenc's 1956 score, with its heavy reliance on woodwind and brass hues, reflects those conflicting currents. Moments of mystical devotion are evoked in serenely lyrical passages; jagged themes and acidic harmonizations suggest the chaos and unpredictability of the time. With Anne Manson conducting, the Juilliard Orchestra gave this magnificent music a solid, exquisitely shaped reading at the first performance, on Wednesday evening.

This is a work in which the ground shifts constantly: Blanche de la Force, a young woman from an aristocratic family, has a sincere calling but lacks the fortitude, at first, to remain at the convent once it has lost its status as a refuge and become a target of the revolution. Yet the balance between courage and self-preservation shifts in surprising ways. Blanche resolves her conflict in the opera's final moments, joining the other nuns on their way to the scaffold. By contrast, Mother Marie, the assistant prioress, has persuaded the nuns to take a vow of martyrdom but allows herself to be convinced that God has given her an escape.

None of this is lost on Fabrizio Melano, whose sleek direction avoids fussiness and keeps the focus on the work's ideas. Donald Eastman's spare set — a vaguely cruciform platform (a small-scale allusion, perhaps, to the central image of John Dexter's 1977 Met production); a looming Dalíesque crucifix; and an occasional table, chair or bed — similarly avoids unnecessary distraction.

The well-balanced student cast brought the work to life vividly and with a firm sense of the French vocal style that drives this music. (Unlike the Met, which used Joseph Machlis’s English translation, Juilliard is performing the work in French.)

Tharanga Goonetilleke, a soprano from Sri Lanka, brought an appealingly rich tone — and, more important, a sense of innocence, conflict and, in her final scene, radiance — to her characterization of Blanche. Haeran Hong, as Sister Constance, Blanche’s closest companion among the nuns, matched the impulses of Ms. Goonetilleke’s performance in their joint scenes, but with a lighter, more sweetly lyrical timbre.

Lacey Jo Benter sang Madame de Croissy, the first prioress, with the world-weary gravity and resignation the role requires. As her successor, Madame Lidoine, Emalie Savoy produced a velvety tone that conveyed her character’s philosophical grounding, just as Renée Tatum brought a slightly frenzied edge to the music of the more fanatical Mother Marie. And Paul Appleby, a tenor with a sweet, beautifully sculptured tone, was outstanding as the Chevalier de la Force, Blanche’s brother.

*“Dialogues des Carmélites” runs through Sunday at the Peter Jay Sharp Theater at the Juilliard School, Lincoln Center; (212) 749-7406; juilliard.edu.*

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