

to a commission from Trinity Church Wall Street specifying a reimagined Mass that incorporated secular text into the Latin liturgy. Snider and poet Nathaniel Bellows chose to reconceive the Mass in a time of climate change as “a prayer for endangered animals and the imperiled environments in which they live.” The result is musically penetrating and textually provocative, beginning with a Kyrie that immediately establishes the conflict between the natural world and humankind’s disregard of it. Dissonant choral cluster chords emerge over a thrum of low strings to clash with the tonal piano accompaniment, as the text pleads for humans to have mercy “on earth, air, and water ... on all wing, paw, all creed, claw.” An insistent string ostinato emphasizes the urgency of the entreaty as the sopranos fly above the staff like birds delivering an early warning. Bellows then inverts the concept of mercy, asking the earth to forgive us our trespasses against it, closing with “To the vanished, and the left: Forgive us. World, forgive us.” The voices fade, but the harmonies remain unresolved—an open question.

The dramatically shaped Gloria is offered in the original Latin, with no poetic interpolation. Angelic female voices hover in unison or in consonant thirds and sixths over a celestial harp, but intermittent harmonic displacements presage impending chaos. A marimba ushers in the men on “qui tollis peccata mundi,” and discord overtakes concord, as the voices tumble over each other, before returning to the peaceful contemplation of the opening. The Alleluia wears its disquiet on its sleeve, with brooding male voices intoning Bellows’s dark imagery against sawing strings. The word “alleluia” is set first as a question, then as a lament. The Credo undergoes a transformation from the personal to the communal, from one person believing in one God to a global rallying cry for the protection of endangered species who cannot communicate their distress: “We believe in all who are at risk.” Sometimes the text gets overly precious, with such lines as “We believe in listen. We believe in wish,” but the sentiment—a rebuke of our solipsism—is powerful.

As with the Gloria, the Latin text of the Sanctus/Benedictus is left intact, and the mood is hopeful and bright. Recalling the opening strains of the Kyrie, the Agnus Dei becomes a prayer for forgiveness, not just for those who admit their trespasses against the earth but for those who don’t. The British choral ensemble Gallicantus, led by Gabriel Crouch, sings with straight-toned purity and precision, though the text is rarely clear. (It’s never a good sign when you’re staring at the text and still can’t find your place.) The paucity of solo voices reinforces the idea that it will take the entire human village to save the planet. On one level, *Mass for the Endangered* is a requiem for the natural world and the elements of it that have already vanished. But Snider’s colorful music, while not shying away from the pain of this realization, is, at heart, optimistic, offering a sliver of hope that we may yet save what’s left.

—Joanne Sydney Lessner

Liang: *Inheritance*



CD Narucki, Wiest, H. J. Young; Cerón; ensemble, Schick. Texts. Albany Troy1819



IN 1862, Sarah Lockwood Pardee married William Wirt Winchester, the only son of the owner of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. When William and his father both died in the 1880s, Sarah inherited fifty percent of the company, making her one of the wealthiest women in the world. Sarah Winchester was prey to intense phobias, especially involving the spirit world. She felt cursed, particularly because of all the money she and her company made on the manufacture of firearms, including the famous lever-action Winchester ’73, “The Gun that Won the West.” She moved west, purchasing ranchland in what’s now downtown Los Altos, California, where she built a mansion, one of the most curious buildings in

the country. Winchester added rooms and annexes until her death in 1922; she held séances, at which she would receive instructions from the spirits about what to build next. The house, which has become a tourist attraction and historical landmark, has more than 160 rooms, plus stairways that lead to the ceiling, doors that open onto walls, and cabinets with drawers that are only one inch deep—oddsities built to distract malevolent spirit visitors. Winchester and her house have provided inspiration for films, books and theatrical works, including this recent opera by composer Lei Liang and librettist Matt Donovan.

Inheritance is a meditation on the meaning of Winchester’s life and on the hopelessness of the rampant gun violence in American culture. Winchester ruminates on the house, the thousands of Native American lives lost in the “settlement” of the West, the loss of her daughter (who lived but a few weeks) and the fate of the passenger pigeon, brought to extinction by unchecked hunting. The opera is dreamy and ethereal, with mysterious music and ambiguous texts. But there are moments of clarity and references in the music to gunfire, manufacturing machinery and the pounding of hammers, contrasted with the keening of spirits and furtive, occasionally frenetic sounds from the harpsichord. Sarah Winchester was obsessed with the number thirteen, and this is reflected both in the music and in the libretto.

Liang employs many recurring musical leitmotifs, small and unusual enough to avoid seeming pedantic. He has the instrumental ensemble incorporate many extended playing techniques throughout to create unusual, otherworldly sound colors. In particular, his writing for the two percussionists is virtuoso. Much of the vocalizing is spoken word and is, appropriately in this context, repetitive and fragmentary. Similarly, most of the music sounds unmetered, though the excellent small essay in the booklet it really is. The music drifts from scene to scene, much as Sarah Winchester would wander around in her house.

Susan Narucki, as Sarah, again dem-

onstrates that she's one of the great practitioners of contemporary vocal music. She vividly displays Sarah's sorrow, loneliness, bitterness and confusion. She's lyrical where the music allows and can traverse the wide leaps and disjointed passages with suave nuance. The supporting cast is quite good, as well. As Ghost 1, soprano Kirsten Wiest sings in a pure, at times childlike voice. Her big moment is a nursery song that conveys both innocence and tragedy. Mezzo Hillary Jean Young, as Ghost 2, isn't given a big solo, unfortunately; I would have enjoyed hearing more of her warm-toned voice. Baritone Josué Cerón, as Ghost 3/Tour Guide, has a lovely singing and speaking voice, but he seems to struggle with pronunciation. That said, his performance is dramatically satisfying. Conductor Steven Schick masterfully maintains an atmospheric sense of timelessness but also keeps the performers focused, making a strong case for the opera's dramatic relevance. There's much to admire and cogitate upon here. —Arlo McKinnon

Adam: *Le Postillon de Lonjumeau*



DVD Valiquette; Spyres, Leguérinel, Kubla; Chorus and Orchestra of the Opéra de Rouen, Rouland. Naxos 2.110662, 137 mins., subtitles



PARISIAN COMPOSER

Adolphe Adam, best known today for the 1841 ballet *Giselle*, wrote sixty stage works—vaudevilles, opéras comiques, operettas and the occasional serious opera. The most enduring is the three-act *Postillon de Lonjumeau*, given a successful premiere in 1836 by the Opéra-Comique. It triumphed in many major European cities and then in the U.S., but by 1900 it was not often performed anymore, except for an occasional revival for a dashing tenor who could manage the high Ds of its most famous aria, “Mes



Spyres with Valiquette in Paris

amis, écoutez l'histoire.” *Postillon* made its spectacular return to the Opéra-Comique in 2019, happily now available for home viewing.

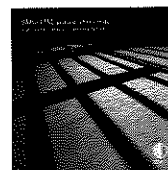
The convoluted but bracing plot deals with a coachman who runs off to become an opera singer; his jilted wife inherits a fortune and conspires to entrap and remarry him. In the end, as in *Fledermaus*, she outwits her confused, wandering husband and saves him from legal trouble. Thus *Postillon* (like *Show Boat*, *Gypsy* and *Phantom of the Opera*) provides a backstage drama with onstage performance sequences in antiquated styles. Adam, unlike many of his contemporaries, appreciated the music of the *ancien régime*; his deft evocation of the era of Rameau finds skillful echo in the lavish set pieces Michel Fau's production presents here, featuring Emmanuel Charles's colorful high-camp sets (the action starts on a wedding cake) and lavish Christian Lacroix costumes. Fau wittily adds an actor playing Louis XV (the Opéra-Comique's patron), plus some additional dialogue; he also takes a drag turn as Latour's worldly maid.

Parisian favorite Michael Spyres has long since mastered the style and linguistic clarity required for the role of the husband, and he clearly enjoys his assignment, managing the extensive range and sounding trills in his famous *ronde* (which gets a group reprise in the work's happy finale). Florie Valiquette, as the clever, spirited

heroine, charmingly employs a pleasing though not exceptional soprano; her wistful Act II air is a highlight, though its florid cabaletta could shine more brightly. Polished baritone Franck Leguérinel stylishly plays the Marquis, the impresario who discovers the new tenor star and later unknowingly pursues his cast-off wife.

Sébastien Rouland leads the musically satisfying forces of the Opéra de Rouen with aplomb and grace. This very diverting video release deserves wide circulation. —David Shengold

Lang: *Prisoner of the State*



CD Mathevet; Owens, Ott, Oke, Myers, Pearce, Eddy, Porto; New York Philharmonic, van Zweden; Men of the Concert Chorale of New York, Nally. Texts. Decca Gold DEC B003210702



IN THIS seventy-five-minute opera by David Lang, the composer breaks away from his minimalist predilections to deliver a theatrical work that draws more directly from Ludwig van Beethoven than does Lang's previous work or that of his fellow Bang on a Can postminimalists. In *Prisoner of the State*, which received its premiere in 2019 from the New York Philharmonic, led by music director Jaap van Zweden, a woman impersonates a male prison guard in order to free her husband from horrific and wrongful incarceration—also the basic plot of *Fidelio*, Beethoven's only opera. But Lang, who wrote his own libretto, frames the story as that of all political dissidents, protestors and falsely jailed people, not just of one man (here referred to only as the Prisoner).

Prisoner of the State is indebted to *Fidelio* in multiple ways, but Lang's opera also recalls the bleak subject matter and impactful, melancholic score of Leoš Janáček's Dostoyevskian prison drama, *From the House of the Dead*. Musically, Lang takes his very tonal tendencies and makes his phrases longer, more melodically accessible