



Woman scorned: Soprano Judith Barnes stars in Vertical Player Repertory's "Medee."

Vengeance is hers

Vertical Player Repertory brings Milhaud's forgotten opera 'Medee' to Boerum Hill stage

By Kevin Filipksi
for The Brooklyn Papers

Since French composer Darius Milhaud wrote hundreds of works at lightning speed, the bulk of his output is often considered lightweight, lacking in true artistry.

But, as the Vertical Player Re-

pertory's performances of his tragic opera "Médée" shows, Milhaud was a composer of considerable skills who was able to utilize his musical economy of means to create great dramatic effects, whether it was in his chamber music, symphonies or stage works.

It's amazing that "Médée" (composed in 1939) is actually

being performed live in Brooklyn at all: this is the first time we've had the opportunity to hear one of Milhaud's operas in person. (It's only available on CD in brief excerpts.)

Like that of many other 20th century French composers, Milhaud's music — in spite of its lyricism and accessibility — is rarely

heard live in performance, and it seems that this is the case solely because no companies are programming it, assuming that audiences always want to stay away from the unfamiliar.

That may also be the main reason why the likes of the Metropolitan Opera and New York City Opera don't produce any Milhaud operas — although his grand opus, "Christopher Columbus," would be right at home on either stage. But several of Milhaud's stage works require fewer instrumental and vocal forces and are perfect for any enterprising company to step up to the plate and take a swing at them.

Enter Vertical Players Repertory (VPR). The company that was founded by Judith Barnes in 1998 performs operas in a reconver-

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Boerum Hill factory, and Milhaud's "Médée" — which has a libretto by Milhaud's wife Madeleine (who is still alive, as of this writing, at age 104!) and had its premiere in Paris in 1940 — is a prime example of the type of opera it should be introducing to audiences.

Milhaud's opera is taken from the final sections of the Medea tragedy from Greek mythology which includes the time Medea's former husband Jason is remarried to her final revenge by killing his new wife Créuse and Jason and Medea's only son. The compression of the action into three tableaux, or acts, which are quite short (approximately 70 minutes total) — coupled with Milhaud's economical music — makes for a propulsive operatic tragedy of the first order.

Director Seth Baumrin, inspired by the atmosphere surrounding the opera's creation, has set the work in Vichy France during the Nazi occupation. Although this doesn't emerge clearly enough (unless one reads Baumrin's program notes), the fact remains that the starkness of his staging in the group's dilapidated but intimate space is perfect for an opera filled with such vengeful brutality.

Always eloquent and richly melodic, Milhaud's music is exquisite on the ears when performed with the refinement it calls for. For "Médée," VPR is performing a piano reduction of the score, which unavoidably lessens the tragic grandeur of Milhaud's original orchestrations. (One listen to French soprano Natalie Dessay's performance of one of the opera's arias on her 1997 recital disc from EMI Classics proves the point.)

Still, when there's a pianist of the caliber of Audrey Saint-Gil — who performs the score with nimble grace,

strikingly underpinning the vocal lines and often taking musical charge of the drama — there's certainly no reason to consider this a "lesser" version of Milhaud's work.

Conducting with a good feel for the opera's musical and dramatic arcs, Peter Szep leads an impressive roster of 17 superbly rehearsed singers to give a tremendously affecting account of this difficult work.

The dozen singer-actors who form the work's Greek chorus are splendid throughout, whether commenting on the action or participating in it. In the silent role of Medea and Jason's child, Lucia Pompetti is properly docile. Mezzo Twila Ehmcke (Medea's nurse) and baritone Gustavo

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Vertical Player Repertory presents Darius Milhaud's opera "Médée" at 219 Court St. between Warren and Wyckoff streets in Boerum Hill on Nov. 19 at 4 pm. Tickets are \$25. For reservations and more information, call (212) 539-2696 or visit www.vpropera.org.

Ahuali (King Creon) invest their characters with suitable dignity.

As Princess Créuse, soprano Sungji Kim sings beautifully, especially in her upper register where her two arias mostly lie. (Kim alternates the role with Heather Green, who sings the final performance on Nov. 19.) Tenor Percy Martinez skillfully registers the complicated emotions of Medea's estranged husband Jason with the necessary clarity, in keeping with Milhaud's musical conception of the role.

And, in the title role, Judith Barnes uses her strong soprano voice to create a truly tragic anti-heroine. In her powerful monologue that takes up all of the second act, Barnes cuts right to the quick of what is the emotional center of the entire opera.

If Vertical Players Repertory had simply brought "Médée" to the stage, that would have been good enough. But by giving such an intensely dramatic account of this forgotten but worthy 20th century opera, it deserves our eternal thanks.