



David Hertzberg, *composer*

Seen and Heard International

SINCE 1999 A LIVE REVIEW SITE FOR OPERA, BALLET, CONCERTS, BROADCASTS AND THEATRE

Communing with the Dead at the Premiere of David Hertzberg's *The Rose Elf*

15/06/2018



United States New York Opera Fest – Hertzberg, *The Rose Elf*: Soloists and Orchestra/Teddy Poll (conductor), The Catacombs, Green-Wood Cemetery, New York, 10.6.2018. (RP)



Samantha Hankey as *The Rose Elf* © Matthew Placek

For a young composer deemed 'opulently gifted' and 'a twenty-first-century Ravel', David Hertzberg is a rather modest fellow, cheerful and friendly, but then he has a lot to smile about. He was the Composer in Residence with Opera Philadelphia and Music-Theatre Group for the 2017-2018 season, commissions seem to flow his way, and his works are performed in major venues across the country.

In April, the Music Critics Association of North America named Hertzberg's *The Wake World* the best new opera of the year. It premiered during Opera Philadelphia's Festival O17 to rave reviews at the Barnes Foundation, one of the world's great collections of Impressionist, Post-Impressionist and early modern paintings. The festival was a week of opera and related events across the city, which *The Wall Street Journal* termed 'a dramatic reboot' for the company.

The Rose Elf, for which Hertzberg wrote both the music and the libretto, received its first full performances last week in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery. Composed in 2016, excerpts were presented in a workshop performance at Opera Philadelphia, but Hertzberg had to postpone finishing the orchestration of the opera because of the commission that led to *The Wake World*.

It was the first offering in a new concert series, *The Angel's Share*, in the cemetery's catacombs, presented by Unison Media and Green-Wood and curated by Andrew Ousley. Normally off limits to the public, the Catacombs were built in the 1850s and house the remains of 30 New York City families. Stretching across 478 pastoral acres in Brooklyn, the cemetery boasts extraordinary works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century sculpture, statuary and architecture. It is the final resting place of thousands of historic figures, including Leonard Bernstein.

Hertzberg does not retell Hans Christian Andersen's gloomy tale, but rather recreates it atmospherically and emotionally. Director R. B. Schlather added a layer of simmering eroticism through the combination of flowers, lighting and movement, which created a hothouse atmosphere that was equal parts Tennessee Williams and Diaghilev.

(continues)

Schlather, who also collaborated with Hertzberg on *The Wake World*, made use of the full length of the space, which is basically a long white-washed hallway. Initially the darkness was cut only by the light of the 80-member audience's green glow sticks. Later, the elfin domain was delineated by the harsh glare of white light, while the human world was illuminated in softer hues. Heaps of flowers added a luxurious, sensuous feel to the otherwise stark surroundings.

Mezzo-soprano Samantha Hankey was the Rose Elf, a towering figure clad in a silver sequin dress and knee-high black boots. Vocally and dramatically fearless, Hankey was otherworldly, but more warrior princess than elf. It was a remarkable performance.

Alisa Jordheim as the girl was innocent and naive at the outset but evolved into a complex mix of characterizations. (Hertzberg gave the lovers both human and mythical personas.) The girl's conflicted emotions were reflected in Jordheim's vibrant soprano and the canvas that was her face. As her beloved, Kyle Bielfield revealed an intriguing voice, making one wish that he had not been killed off quite so soon and required to lie motionless on the floor for most of the opera.

Andrew Bogard was phenomenal as the girl's brother. As a dancer, his model had to be either Nijinsky or Nureyev; as a singer, he brought to mind Norman Treigle. (I am generally hesitant to make such comparisons, but that is what sprang to mind while watching him.) He died smothered in a cascade of flowers, his silhouette bathed in a column of light, an image tinged with the twined ecstasies of martyrdom and Dionysian rites.

Costumed in a hodgepodge of floral patterns, they were called upon to move as much as sing. As a trio they writhed in passion; the brother later entwines himself with the corpse of the man that he had murdered. At such close range it was if they were under a microscope, with no detail of their performances unobserved.

The small orchestra was heavy in percussion, including glockenspiel, cymbals, tam-tam and bass drum. The brilliant orchestrations and the swelling phrases underpinned by the percussion, some passionate and swirling, others driven and dissonant, did indeed bring to mind Ravel. For the lyrical passages the orchestra textures thinned, so balance was seldom an issue. Hertzberg's gifts as a melodist, however, were best displayed in the beautiful solos that he composed for the viola and cello.

Conductor Teddy Poll mastered the acoustics of what was basically an echo chamber. A surprising amount of detail emerged from the orchestra, although the subtleties of the vocal lines and text were often lost.

The impact of the performance was a marriage of the space in which it was performed, the creative powers of Hertzberg and Schlather, and powerful performances from a special breed of singers able to communicate as effectively through movement as with their voices. And, of course, Andrew Ousley, who has the imagination and the wherewithal to bring it all together.

Rick Perdian

<http://seenandheard-international.com/2018/06/communing-with-the-dead-at-the-premiere-of-david-hertzbergs-the-rose-elf/>