



## Julia Bullock, *soprano*

### **The New York Times**

#### **Where Foxes Are Wise and Humans Are Troubled**

##### **'The Cunning Little Vixen,' at Peter Jay Sharp Theater**

Anthony Tommasini

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A majority of characters in Janacek's enchanting "Cunning Little Vixen" are animals. In presenting this great Czech opera, first performed in Brno in 1924, most companies seize on the chance to create fanciful animal costumes and beguiling sets that evoke leafy forests. The director Emma Griffin dispenses with all that for the Juilliard Opera's affecting production that opened at the school's Peter Jay Sharp Theater on Sunday afternoon. Instead, the young Juilliard singers look like, well, young Juilliard singers, wearing casual summer outfits designed by Jessica Trejos.



Juilliard Opera Julia Bullock, far right, as Vixen; Raquel González, in glasses, as Rooster; and others in "The Cunning Little Vixen," at the Peter Jay Sharp Theater

In an interview with The Juilliard Journal, Ms. Griffin explains that animal costumes inevitably look "cutesy." Her aim was to reveal the "philosophical core" of the opera, which has a libretto by Janacek. Erik Chisholm, the author of a book on the Janacek operas, aptly describes this work as "an almost Buddhist hymn in praise of the basic unity of all living creatures." Ms. Griffin's concept is deeply resonant. Janacek wanted us to see ourselves in these animal characters.

It is a joy to watch these splendid young cast members embracing their inner animals, leaping about the stage while also looking so natural. In one scene Ms. Griffin presents a rooster (Raquel González) as a strutting, slick-haired man in black slacks and suspenders, and his hens as a bevy of cackling blondes in short white slips.

There is depth and complexity beneath the surface whimsy of Janacek's score. Forest creatures are restless sorts, a quality captured in shifting, harmonically elusive music. In writing vocal lines, Janacek hewed closely to the patterns of the Czech words. There is a strong argument for performing his operas in the original language. But this production uses a wonderful English translation by Yveta Synek Graff and Robert T. Jones, which the well-coached cast sings, over all, with clear diction.

The captivating soprano Julia Bullock brings a rosy, agile voice and light-footed grace to her performance as the impish Vixen. The compelling bass-baritone Aubrey Allicock is excellent as the Forester, a man with a dreamy side, who takes the Vixen cub captive and rears her in his home, causing no end of trouble.

Much later, when the Vixen escapes, she meets a seductive male Fox (a plush soprano, Karen Vuong). Before the Vixen knows it she is pregnant and the couple must get married, joined by forest friends. Janacek gives us one of the most jubilant wedding choruses in all of opera.