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REVIEWS

Tod Machover, Joyce DiDonato Listen to the Trees in New Opera

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For years, we've had it wrong. Trees aren't just to be hugged but to be heard. At least that's the theory (and a convincing one) in *Overstory Overture*, the new Tod Machover opera of sorts about communication among trees, and those who hear them.

Based on Richard Powers' 2018 novel *The Overstory*, the 35-minute chamber opera, which may eventually be expanded into a full-evening piece, dramatizes the plight of the fictional academic Dr. Patricia Westerford, whose research into how trees communicate (through the air or their roots) saw her reputation go into a free fall. A Sejong Soloists commission, with libretto by Simon Robson, the score calls for 18 strings, percussion (including a five-octave marimba and bass drum), plus a MIDI keyboard with prepared samples.



Mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, composer Tod Machover, conductor Earl Lee

Premiered March 7 at Alice Tully Hall by Joyce DiDonato and the Soloists under Earl Lee, the piece proved highly effective, thanks to the vocal conviction of DiDonato and the accumulated stage smarts of composer Machover, longtime leader at the MIT Media Lab with a well-earned reputation for his technology-expanding pieces. This marks his eighth opera.

To best appreciate *Overstory Overture* it helps to have a save-the-earth frame of mind (as embodied by the inner life of trees) to empathize with the heroine, who, early on, addresses the audience point blank to explain who she is and what has been done to her. I was also curious to hear what Machover might have wrought by attaching contact microphones to trees, processing the results at the MIT Lab, and combining them with traditional instruments. Call it electronic impressionism.

The score's subheads are "Listen," "Who Am I," "Crisis," and "Be a Tree." Minimal staging included some deep blue lighting and having the chamber orchestra coalesce in a semi-circle around DiDonato, who was decidedly plain-costumed in black and white.

Early on in the piece, the vocal lines project a good sense of the text, with string players using extended techniques such as running their hands up and down the fingerboard. Further on, the vocal lines become unmoored from the rustling going on in the orchestra; as Westerford moves into closer communication with the trees, gentle harmonic support arrives from the strings. The unobtrusive electronics from speakers fanned out across the back of the stage correspond with the score's descriptions, including "twitters," "flicks," "flutters," and "root murmuring." Ideas that initially seem a bit commonplace in fact form a foundation for something much bigger.



The Sejong Soloists surround Joyce DiDonato in Tod Machover's *Overstory Overture* at Tully Hall



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Three ecstatic crescendos, each distinct but sharing a solid harmonic core, enable a listener to feel, rather than just hear, the importance of the issues at hand—giving them far more impact than a myriad of websites dedicated to global warming. Though not necessarily a great melodist, Machover ushers in the final section with a theme that comes soaring out of the violas and acts like a sweeping moment of revelation. Surtitles would have been welcome if only because a more specific audience relationship with the words might've delivered more portals into the roots of the piece.

Machover has long stood apart from the larger contemporary music world, partly because one easily views him as an electronic technology explorer/inventor who constantly pushes forward and maybe at the expense of his reputation as a composer (which has also included a fair number of traditional, non-electronic works). In any medium, he has always chosen unconventional subject matter and has done so with an indomitable communicative urgency, never with his MIT stronghold seeming like an ivory tower. At times, his inclusiveness has involved technological participation from audiences—as in *The Brain Opera*—that were too far ahead of their time to be effective, both for those invited to participate and those listening. *Overstory Overture* is something of a welcome creative consolidation.

DiDonato was in imposing form and the Sejong Soloists under Lee confidently negotiated the semi-staging as well as the notes. I look forward to subsequent performances after they've had a chance to grow, you'll pardon the expression, with the piece.

Photos: Youngsam Yoon



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