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The Chronicle of Nine

BOSTON

Odyssey Opera, Boston Modern Orchestra Project

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OPERAS SHOULD NOT WAIT four decades to receive a premiere—especially a work so inviting as Arnold Rosner’s *The Chronicle of Nine*.

Rosner (1945–2013) enjoyed relatively few performances during his lifetime. The New York–based composer all but gave up trying to stage his extensive body of work, settling mostly for some influential recordings. It took the initiative of conductor Gil Rose, uniting his Boston Modern Orchestra Project ensemble with his Odyssey Opera troupe, to bring *The Chronicle of Nine* to the stage for the first time on Feb. 1 in Jordan Hall at Boston’s New England Conservatory.

In 1984 Rosner set a libretto from playwright Florence Stevenson, detailing the brief life of the hapless Tudor Queen, Lady Jane Grey. Lady Jane was forced to the throne at the age of sixteen or seventeen (estimations of her birthdate vary) through complex family machinations; her reign lasted just nine days, and ended in her beheading. Sections of the opera have been realized as part of Rosner’s Seventh Symphony, but the complete work has never previously been performed.

The Chronicle of Nine was semi-staged, in period costume, singers sharing the cramped space with three dozen choristers and seventy-odd musicians. Action was limited to entrances, exits and modest props, but the emotional luster in Rosner’s creation came from the music, not the theater. The opinionated composer seemed to dislike everyone—minimalists, serialists, Romantics, even Mozart, “the most overrated composer of all.” His affinities ran to early styles—“neo-1600” he called it.

Abundantly orchestrated, Rosner’s score takes roots in Renaissance polyphony and Baroque forms. Add to that adventurous triadic settings, modal experimentations, quirky dissonances, and Romantic excesses. Rosner’s music expresses emotion idiosyncratically, intuitively bringing dramatic weight to text. Dirges, dances, chorales, promenades and fanfares came and went in the service of word painting.

Lyric soprano Megan Pachecano sang Lady Jane, supplying precise articulation, lush vibrato and typecast physical presence to the role. Her surrounding cast proved equally impressive. The dark vocal textures of mezzo Rebecca Krouner (Jane’s mother, Frances Grey) and contralto Stephanie Kacoyanis (her “rival” and successor, “Bloody” Princess Mary Tudor) balanced Pachecano’s lyricism admirably.

The men—devising various schemes—included powerful low voices as well. Scenes with bass-baritone James Demler (Earl of Arundel) and bass David Salsbery Fry (Pembroke) stood out. Tenor William Hite and baritone Aaron Engebretth sang strongly as the pathetic plotters, Jane’s father and father-in-law.

Tenor Gene Stenger sang the narrating Minstrel with distinction. Rosner crafted *The Chronicle of Nine* in three tense acts, beginning each with an extensive instrumental prelude and the Minstrel’s solo aria. Stenger, tuneful and bold, eased the audience into the tragic plot with style.

Every facet of *The Chronicle of Nine* had appeal. The libretto idiomatically served both the 16th-century setting and modern ears. Awash with historical details, Rosner still made Lady Jane seem a simple, devout child snared innocently by other’s ambitions.

The through-composed score never relented. There were some memorable solo moments, like Pachecano’s religious aria, “In thy hands,” in the second scene, as she soberly realizes the distressing events unfolding around her. The same music would return in the moments before her beheading.

A dynamic scene between the two queens—Mary and Jane—sung over elaborate accompaniment from the cello section, included a subtle funeral march as Mary revealed Jane’s death sentence. Horns and winds from Rose’s BMOP ensemble played the rich orchestration with gusto. There were many distinctive moments for harp (Ina Zdorovetchi).

The premiere of *The Chronicle of Nine* serves as a centerpiece for Odyssey Opera’s “Tudor” season, which also includes rarities such as Saint-Saëns’s *Henry VIII* and Britten’s *Gloriana*. It marks the fifth collaboration between Rose’s two troupes—including Tobias Picker’s *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*, which won a Grammy Award this year for best opera recording on the BMOPsound label. —*Keith Powers*