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The Blind **NEW YORK CITY** **Lincoln Center Festival** **7/10/13**

Among the many unusual works featured in the 2013 Lincoln Center Festival was *The Blind*, by Lera Auerbach, a one-act opera based on the famous symbolist play of Maurice Maeterlinck, *Les Aveugles*. Maeterlinck's play broke new ground in its day and served as a strong inspiration to such modernist playwrights as Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett. Although written in the summer of 1994, Auerbach's opera had to wait until 2011 to receive its first public hearing, courtesy of the Berlin Kammeroper. The performances in the Lincoln Center Festival (seen July 10) represent the world premiere of the opera in its entirety, with the complete overture as the composer intended.

In this unusual production, directed by John La Bouchardière, the audience was required to wear blindfolds. This circumstance added both positives and negatives to the production. On the one hand, the deprivation of sight caused us to focus more intently upon our hearing and tactile sense, and it added an awareness of the plight of the drama's characters, a group of blind people taken out for a late-season stroll from the asylum in which they are interned. Having been led to the shore of the island upon which they dwell, they have been left and told to sit still until the elderly priest can return to assist in bringing them back to their home. On the negative side, the lack of visual stimulation made certain segments of the music seem overly static. The cast of twelve singers wandered among the audience, adding a very effective sense of displacement to the experience.

Other than some electronic music, *The Blind* is an a capella work, here combined with appropriate environmental sounds and sensory effects. Auerbach's writing leans heavily on stylistic elements of the later Italian madrigalists without being consumed in a full recreation of that style. Her melodic lines are versatile in character, embracing simple and tonal lines when needed, yet seamlessly moving to more advanced, angular, chromatic lines as needed. Her harmonic palette is equally broad, spanning the world from triadic to highly dissonant timbres. Her music can be beguilingly comforting or strained and declamatory, depending on the demands of her libretto (written by Auerbach herself).

On the whole, the opera and production were quite successful. The cast seemed unfazed by the difficulties of the music, and in general conductor Julian Wachner kept things moving along at a dramatically appropriate pace. I suspect that I was not the only attendee surprised to learn, upon arriving at the end of the performance and removing my blindfold, that we had been seated in small quartets of chairs, all arranged back to back. And although some of my fellow audience members were overheard to be grouching about the work, most seemed to share my view that this had been a very entertaining evening of experimental musical theater. □

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