

# ARTS + LEISURE

The Addison

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Five opera stars arrived in town to rehearse for two weeks before presenting Ricky Ian Gordon and Mark Campbell's "Rappahannock County," during the Opera Company of Middlebury's 2026 Fall Festival, "Music in Troubled Times," held Sept. 23 through Oct. 4 at Town Hall Theater. Pictured are soprano Renée Richardson, mezzo-soprano Claire McCahan, tenor Patrick Bessenbacher, baritone Joshua Jeremiah, and baritone Adam Richardson.

PHOTO / SUSAN WOLOHOJIAN

## 'Rappahannock County' asks us to stretch our empathy

While many small opera companies fill their seasons with beloved but safe staples of the standard repertoire, Opera Company of Middlebury has made a habit of taking on the worthwhile risk of contemporary opera in its fall productions, introducing audiences to newer works that can be challenging and rewarding.

"Rappahannock County," which opened Sept. 30 as part of the company's "Music in Troubled Times" festival, is very much in that tradition.

The 2011 "theatrical song cycle" by composer Ricky Ian Gordon, with a libretto by Mark Campbell, draws on Civil War-era letters to tell the stories of people living in Virginia during some of its most harrowing times. Rather than



### Theater review

By KELSEY WOOD

following one continuous narrative, the opera unfolds in a series of vignettes: an enslaved mother burying her infant daughter; a white preacher justifying slavery with biblical verses; two newly freed people preparing to finally be married; and so forth.

Staged and directed by Opera Company of Middlebury Artistic Director Douglas Anderson and conducted by Music Director Maestro Filippo Ciabatti, the production asks its

audience to do something that can be deeply uncomfortable: empathize across lines we would ordinarily draw starkly. The question is, to what end?

In the Oct. 2 performance, the cast, made up of five singers — a tenor, a soprano, two baritones and a mezzo-soprano — handled that difficult material impressively.

One of the opera's standout arias, performed by tenor Patrick Bessenbacher, takes the perspective of a 17-year-old Confederate soldier who is young enough to have never kissed a girl, and fresh enough to war to never have killed. We watch the boy, who has shown no particular indication whether he understands what he's fighting for, die cold and alone in the woods while thinking of his mother.

See *OPERA* on page 2

## OPERA

*continued from page 1*

Bessenbacher, whose voice has such ease and flexibility that he's able to communicate the nuances of this tension with remarkable control, nailed the piece's

technically demanding sotto voce passages with more delicacy lying wounded in the snow than many singers could manage standing up. The result was a performance that strained your empathy to a point of discomfort.

It should be said that the point here is not to excuse the Confederacy or the people who fought for it, but to hold that truth alongside an understanding of the vulnerability that allowed a young person to be swallowed by such a system. This tension feels particularly poignant in a world where hateful, dangerous movements still fatten their ranks by recruiting young people who are not equipped to fully understand what they're being drawn into.

That uncomfortable empathy sits at the heart of the opera, particularly in its treatment of grief.

One of "Rappahannock County's" most complicated ideas is the grief of having loved people within the oppressive hierarchy. In the vignette "In Their Eyes," a volunteer nurse, played by mezzo-soprano Claire McCahan, mourns her beloved husband and son, yet in the privacy of her own thoughts wonders whether she might have lost her loved ones at all if women had been allowed to vote.

In "All I Ever Known," an emancipated woman cautiously acknowledges that she's "sure freedom's good, freedom's fine," while mourning her separation from the white children she tucked into bed each night as if they were her own. Renée Richardson's ability to sit inside both the musical and emotional tension of a moment, her radiant soprano blossoming in the most poignant passages, gave the scene its dramatic weight. The audience found ourselves lingering in discomfort again over emotions that don't fit neatly into the larger story of emancipation.

Gordon and Campbell's opera doesn't offer tidy answers to these contradictions. Instead, it asks the audience to sit with them. Is that a useful request for art to make? What do we gain from feeling compassion for people participating in something unforgivable?

In a Q&A after the performance, baritone Joshua Jeremiah, whose magnetic stage-presence and world-class baritone brought to life some of the opera's most compelling characters, offered one perspective.

"No one thinks they're the bad guy. They all think they're doing bad things for the right



Renée Richardson, Claire McCahan, Patrick Bessenbacher, Joshua Jeremiah, and Adam Richardson recently starred in the Opera Company of Middlebury's production of "Rappahannock County."

PHOTOS / SUSAN WOLOOHOJIAN

reasons or good things that the rest of us think are bad. Very few people view themselves as a bad person, and to have it be your job — to put yourself in those situations and justify those things, as a human being — is kind of stretching what you are comfortable with and that ability to see something from someone else's point of view. I mean, I grew up a very sheltered, conservative, Bible literalist, and I am none of those things anymore. And really, truly, it is because I was forced to empathize with people that would make different choices than me. And through that exercise, I was able to — and am still finding out where I stand on things."

Of course, there were moments of what you could call levity, too.

McCahan, whose rich, laser-focused voice was equally at home across a varied emotional terrain, brought a touch of Sweeney Todd's Mrs. Lovett to the aria "I Listen," in which an old woman sells fresh pies at Yankee campsites while secretly eavesdropping as a Confederate spy. McCahan confidently landed these rare comedic opportunities as her remarkably even voice glittered across Gordon's American landscape.

Baritone Adam Richardson's hilariously deadpan delivery in "Bound to Be" introduces us to an exhausted, unimpressed, newly emancipated man who still feels pressured to perform a minstrelized version of himself around his white employers, which he keeps up with poorly concealed sarcasm. Richardson's commanding, resonant voice complements his theatrical instincts, whether delivering deadpan poignancy or playing a cheeky enslaved child trying to make sense of the world around him in "Being Small."

Ultimately, "Rappahannock County" doesn't

## Congrats Debby!

"Rappahannock County" marks the final Opera Company of Middlebury production for founding costume designer Debby Anderson, who is retiring after 24 seasons. Anderson, whose work has helped shape the company's visual identity since its inaugural opera in 2004, was celebrated during the opening night performance with a video showcasing her impressive body of work. Her refined, authentic costumes for this last production were a perfect example of why her talents will be missed in the community. Congratulations, Debby!



offer the audience an easy moral framework for understanding what it presents, and even its lighter moments don't try to make the past easier to stomach. What it does is make it harder to flatten people into the categories we use to make sense of tragedy, violence and oppression. In doing this, it asks us to understand how ordinary people become capable of participating in extraordinary cruelty, and to "stretch our empathy" far enough that we're able to look directly at that process.

*Editor's note: Reviewer Kelsey Wood earned a degree in opera performance at the Cleveland Institute of Music.*