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The Rape of Lucretia
VIENNA, VA
Wolf Trap Opera
6/18/16

DESPITE MUCH-DISCUSSED PROBLEMATIC ELEMENTS of its libretto, including overly ripe language and tacked-on Christian moralizing, Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* can still yield memorable music theater when approached with sensitivity. Wolf Trap Opera reiterated that point with a production directed by Louisa Muller. Her decision to move the action into contemporary times, complete with soldiers in combat fatigues, was hardly a revolutionary concept, but it deftly underlined the continued relevance of a story about war, male pride and sexual violence. Muller's most distinctive touch had to do with the Male Chorus and Female Chorus, the former depicted as a priest, the latter suggesting an urban club-crawler who had issues and, by the finale, clutched what appeared to be a rosary. The two clearly struggled at every turn to make sense of things and could not disguise their uncertainty even during their pious coda. Rather than serve as peripheral commentators, they insinuated themselves directly into the proceedings. The Male Chorus, in particular, became quite involved, clutching himself suggestively at the thought of Lucretia and even climbing onto the shoulders of Tarquinius, as if anxious to join in the assault on the supposedly pure wife of Collatinus.

The provocative staging was made all the more absorbing by a cast that, on June 18 in the Barns at Wolf Trap, burrowed deep into the opera. As Lucretia, J'Nai Bridges produced a gorgeous, well-supported tone that called to mind a young Denyce Graves, and she put an intense spin on every phrase. The mezzo subtly revealed Lucretia's mixed feelings about Tarquinius, portrayed with admirable depth by Will Liverman. He used his warm, solid baritone to keenly expressive effect. He also made the most of the opportunity afforded in this production to let the villain show remorse after the rape scene, here carried out on a continually spinning set (Erhard Rom was the atmospheric designer). Brenton Ryan's Male Chorus would have been compelling if only for his superb diction, but he also revealed a beautiful, reedy tenor (compromised only when pushed hard at the top of his range) and incisive theatrical instincts. Kerriann Otano likewise made the Female Chorus a strong presence, and she produced an impressive tone with a glint of steel around the edges. Robust singing and acting came from Christian Zarembo (Collatinus) and Ben Edquist (Junius). Sarah Larsen's hearty mezzo as Bianca and Amy Owens' sweet tone as Lucia also hit the spot, as did their finely detailed portrayals. A wayward woodwind note or two aside, the orchestra played smoothly for Craig Kier, who conducted a nuanced account of Britten's prismatic score.

— Tim Smith