

Little Opera's *Owen Wingrave* – by Patrick Dillon

Like so many of Benjamin Britten's operas, *Owen Wingrave* is a lot easier to respect than it is to love. Commissioned by the BBC and first televised in 1971, with a stellar array of the composer's favorite singers, it marked a return to turf familiar from his *Turn of the Screw*: a homoerotically tinged ghost story by Henry James, as adapted by Myfanwy Piper (the wife of artist John Piper, his stage designer of choice). But *Owen* quite lacks the eerily intoxicating chill factor of that seventeen-years-earlier masterwork; in its place, there's much arid debate about militarism (a Wingrave family tradition) versus pacifism (young Owen's idealistic stance), articulated by some of the most acridly unsympathetic dramatis personae Britten ever conjured into musical life. In fact, it takes most of the hour-long first act for some prime Britten to emerge, in a series of beautifully gauged ensembles; and the opening of the shorter second act, with its backstory-narrating balladeer and offstage boys' voices, offers the opera's most easily engaging four-minute stretch. (It's no secret that children brought out the best in Britten.) But despite a carefully calculated buildup, the climax—Owen's fatal final night, spent locked in the family manse's "haunted room" on a dare from his exceedingly nasty ex-presumed-fiancée—doesn't move or grip. The feeling just isn't there.

It wasn't missing, though, from the New York premiere production, as staged by the Little Opera Theatre at Brooklyn's GK Arts Center on May 12—the finest work I've seen and heard from this laudable organization. Everyone seemed sure of *Owen*'s merits and committed to communicating them; I can't imagine a better case being made for the piece. Philip Shneidman's direction let the story unfold cogently and clearly (with one confusing misstep: an invented procession of, I'm assuming, the Wingrave family ghosts), within Josh Smith's likewise clear and unfussy sets, with Alex Basco Koch's video projections unobtrusively hitting the right notes. The cast was uniformly fine, with standout performances by the warm-voiced lyric baritone Michael Weyandt

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in the title role; the bright-timbred tenor Daniel T. Curran as his fair-weather friend, Lechmere; the sumptuously assertive soprano Tracy Cox as Owen's granite-willed aunt; and Brian Downen as his even more granitic grandfather, somewhat startlingly full-toned in a role written for Peter Pears and most often sung by tenors of the headier Pearsian ilk. The part of Mrs. Coyle, Owen's lone steady supporter, was vividly filled by the versatile Canadian-American-Irish soprano Amelia Watkins, whose vibrant (but never unruly) tones didn't preclude near-perfect diction; she did handsome credit to the memory of its creator, the shamefully never-damed Heather Harper, who'd died just three weeks earlier. There was even a supernumerary bonus in the strong presence of Broadway legend Penny Fuller as the Wingrave housekeeper. Deftly holding the show together from a challenging stage-right, stage-level "pit," conductor Richard Cordova (using Britten protégé David Matthews's chamber orchestration of 2007) led his fifteen expert players in a nuanced, balanced reading that seemed, too, to relish this often angular score's every jagged edge. If my admiration never turned to love, well, I'm not blaming anyone but Britten.