

The Boston Globe

Wachner's Evangeline is Colorful and Assured

By Richard Dyer, January 6, 2006

Opera McGill performance Evangeline Revisited, composed and conducted by Julian Wachner

In October, Julian Wachner conducted the world premiere performances of his first opera, "Evangeline Revisited," at McGill University in Montreal, which is now his home base.

Wachner arrived at Boston University as a student in 1987. Before he left for Canada 13 years later, he must have gotten awfully tired of being acclaimed as the most promising young musician in town. His activities as composer, conductor, organist, and choral director have been so extensive that it's astonishing to realize he is still only 35. "Evangeline Revisited" was a university production and not widely reviewed, but Wachner recently sent the Globe a copy of the score and a DVD. The video was recorded by a fixed camera at some distance from the stage, so it wouldn't be fair to comment on the qualities of the production, as they are only dimly visible. But the opera was audibly born kicking.

Its concept is unusual and bound to arouse controversy when the work begins to get around. And it will, because the music is colorful, varied, assured, and strong enough to carry the opera over the pretensions and rough spots of the libretto by Alexis Nouss. Wachner is a composer with a real sense of drama, and he knows how to solve practical problems. The work is scored, for example, for the same chamber orchestra that Benjamin Britten used for "The Turn of the Screw."

The subject is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's once-popular 1847 narrative poem "Evangeline." For decades it was required reading in junior high schools across America. I can remember spending six weeks on it in eighth grade, and if pressed, I could probably still recite the famous prelude about the forest primeval that all of us were required to memorize.

The story begins with the upheaval that took place when the residents of Acadia (Nova Scotia) were shipped into exile in 1755, many of them ultimately settling in Louisiana. The opera was written to commemorate the 250th anniversary of that event. The young Evangeline and her beloved Gabriel are separated on their wedding day, and the poem traces their lifelong efforts to find each other. They meet only when Evangeline is a gray-haired Sister of Mercy and Gabriel lies dying of a "pestilence" in Philadelphia.

It's a great love story, but one that poses problems for opera because the lovers are together only at the beginning and end of the story. Wachner and Nouss, whose text is in French, decided

that their opera would follow Longfellow's story, but in a different, postmodern way. They aim for wider resonances, so the chorus sings of "Acadia, Treblinka, Hiroshima, Bosnia, Rwanda." Longfellow appears as a character in the opera, serving as a narrator and as a whipping boy.

The part of Evangeline is shared by two sopranos. Evangeline I is the embodiment of Longfellow's romantic vision, and Evangeline II is a sharp-tongued contemporary commentator who is constantly ragging on Evangeline I and Longfellow ("Do you really believe what you are writing?"). Eventually there is a reconciliation between the two Evangelines, although Evangeline II is still carping at the poet at the end ("The forest primeval is always there, and it doesn't give a damn").

Some of this is preachy and confusing, and there are dramaturgical problems, too. Evangeline I and Gabriel are briefly introduced near the beginning, but she doesn't do any significant singing until 30 minutes into the opera; Gabriel has to wait 15 minutes longer. Often they seem peripheral to their own story and to the opera's commentary on it. And that introductory scene is labeled in the libretto as "Brechtian dramaturgy in which the characters present themselves as caricatures." The Brechtian alienation effect the creators strive for here and elsewhere is something that is counter to the very nature of nearly every successful opera, which is to put raw emotion into your face. Brechtian alienation doesn't even work in the operas Brecht wrote with Kurt Weill, because Weill's music packs such a punch.

Wachner's music packs a punch, too. The composer presents many styles without ever creating the effect of pastiche, although sometimes one wonders where his own voice is. There is quite a bit of folk or folk-influenced material; there are cabaret episodes and lots of dance music; Verdi, Stravinsky, Britten, and others are evoked. There are grinding dissonances, but also much melody, glisteningly orchestrated, and with prominent solos for many instrumentalists who become storytellers, too. The medieval purity of the second-act duet of the two Evangelines, accompanied by flute and harp, lingers in the mind. The chorus has the most prominent role, and much of the choral writing is superb more convincing than some of the unidiomatic and extremely demanding writing for the two Evangelines, who sometimes seem to be running an obstacle course instead of expressing themselves.

"Evangeline Revisited" doesn't seem all there yet, but that was true of some of the most beloved operas in the repertory before their composers revised them. Still, there is already plenty in Wachner's score. He needs to work on it some more, and then it needs to pass through the fire of a fully professional production, and then . . . who knows, perhaps future generations

will enjoy "Evangeline Revisited" as much as some of their ancestors cherished Longfellow's poem.

**The American Organist
Chicago Orchestra Hall**

By Morgan Simmons, October issue, 2006

Opening Gala Concert

2006 NATIONAL CONVENTION AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS

Formidable, prodigious, extravagant—adjectives that define the sum and substance of this auspicious event in Orchestra Hall at Symphony Center. The combined talents of conductor, orchestra, organists, and composers were phenomenal. Offered was an abundance of riches, one might say an overabundance, in a program that lasted three hours and 20 minutes. **Julian Wachner is a master at the podium with clarity of beat and a complete command of the intricate scores;** the pickup ensemble called Metropolis Symphony Orchestra responded with splendid playing. Each of the soloists, Philippe Bélanger, David Schrader, Maxine Thevenot, and Thierry Escaich, displayed exceptional technique and consummate musicianship. The opening work, Triptych for Organ and Large Orchestra, composed by conductor Julian Wachner, was commissioned by the Oratory of St. Joseph of Montreal and was completed in 2004. This performance marked the world premiere of all three movements: "Logos," "Agape," and "Angelus." Conceived for a space with ten seconds of reverberation, the work suffered somewhat in the relatively dry acoustic of Orchestra Hall. **"Logos" is a sonic tour de force, making full use of colors, dynamics, and rhythmic energy characteristic of organ and orchestra.** Philippe Bélanger, titular organist of the Oratory in Montreal brought to the score of each movement a dazzling facility and a sensitive ear. **"Agape," which opens with an organ solo in which one feels bathed in love, is a welcome contrast to the surrounding movements. The concluding section, "Angelus," demanding the utmost from all the players, is filled with complex rhythms and textures and brings the extended work to a stunning climax.**

Another world premiere commissioned for Chicago 2006, Aaron David Miller's Sleepy Hollow—A tone poem for organ and orchestra, followed intermission. Stunningly performed by David Schrader, this evocative work in five sections is based on the story of Washington Irving's headless horseman. Miller's musical skill coupled with a vivid imagination brings the narrative alive as he takes the listener on a picturesque, if unsettling journey, making use of a full array of colors from the orchestra and organ. **Schrader and Wachner were masterful in their interpretation of the complex score.**

The concluding work for the gala was the three movement Concerto pour Orgue et Orchestre composed (1995) and performed by Thierry Escaich. A brilliant work marked by relentless energy reflects the chaotic world in which we live, a hint of Apocalypse Now! It was most unfortunate that this feat of ingenuity came at the end of a long, long evening of exceptional

music making. Having heard the work performed under different circumstances, I can attest to its power and effectiveness. That aside, Escaich played magnificently with the highest degree of musical integrity and skill.