

OPERA NEWS

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Odyssey: A Youth Opera

NEW YORK CITY

Young People's Chorus of New York City | Metropolitan Museum's
Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium

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ODYSSEY: A YOUTH OPERA, with an ebullient, lyrical score by Ben Moore and a witty, tightly-rhymed libretto by Kelley Rourke, is more than just an opera for young audiences. In fact, it's an opera for all ages, which was written to be performed by young singers. Commissioned by The Glimmerglass Festival in 2015, *Odyssey* arrived at the Met's Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium for its New York premiere on November 3 in the capable hands of the Young People's Chorus of New York City. Under the leadership of Francisco J. Núñez, these talented teens, known primarily for their choral work, embraced their roles as dramatic storytellers with gusto. Their faces alive with an irresistible sense of fun, they brought fresh energy and enthusiasm to stage director Eric Sean Fogel's simple, coordinated movements. Whether playing blissed-out Lotus Eaters, insatiable pigs, homesick sailors, or impatient ladies-in-waiting, they never lost sight of the tale's adventure and exoticism.

With the exception of baritone Brian Vu and soprano Meroë Adeeb, as the two Bards who narrated the action, all the principal roles were sung by members of the Young People's Chorus. Zaccariah Wright and Dea Elezaj offered pure voices that illuminated the constancy of Odysseus and Penelope, and their understated confidence established them both as leaders. Alyssa Blake made a taunting Cerce, tempting Odysseus with a saucy tango, while Tenzin Gund-Morrow was a gentle Aeolus, handing the trapped winds to Odysseus with the sly admonishment, "This is your chance, don't blow it." Naya Griles demonstrated a smooth soprano and regal presence as Athena, with Byron De Leon a glowering, vengeful foil as Poseidon.

As the Bards, Vu and Adeeb offered a winning combination of vibrant, polished vocalism and the easy, knowing sass of cool, older siblings who have read this book before. The combination of Adeeb's glimmering mature voice over the younger sopranos gave the Siren's song a sense of ageless, timeless beauty. Even when voicing the giant puppet Cyclops from offstage, Vu's hearty, focused baritone retained its charm and humor. Griles and De Leon joined Adeeb and Vu for a serene quartet, a satisfying melding of student and professional voices, with the younger pair rising to the occasion with aplomb.

Moore's score moves easily between singing and speaking, with a recurring sailing song between ports, lush choral harmonies for the Lotus Eaters, a tender reunion for the long-parted lovers, and a well-placed rap two-thirds of the way through that summarizes the action to date and sets up the homestretch. Odysseus is welcomed home with "Ithaca, mighty Ithaca," a hummable march in triumphal major that diverts into a choral fantasia, allowing the chorus an opportunity to do what they do best. Rourke's winking libretto includes plenty of clever rhymes and wordplay and manages to be hip without trying too hard. The sets and projections by S. Katy Tucker incorporated slides from the Met's exhibits, while Sophie S. Schneider's costumes overlaid suggestions of character onto casual street gear. There were no supertitles and none were necessary: chorus and soloists alike were crystal clear. Although one sometimes wished for more orchestral color, the light orchestration (piano, cello, percussion, reeds) made it easy to hear the singers. —*Joanne Sydney Lessner*