Review: In Chicago, an Opera Triptych Reaches for Connection

Lyric Opera of Chicago follows a recent world premiere with yet another: “Proximity,” a set of works by three librettist-composer pairs.

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“Proximity,” at Lyric Opera of Chicago, weaves together three operas, including, here, Daniel Bernard Roumain and Anna Deavere Smith’s “The Walkers.” Todd Rosenberg

CHICAGO — Major opera companies used to put on new or

recent works once in a blue moon. But, astonishingly, pieces by living composers make up about a third of the Metropolitan Opera's coming season. And on Friday, Lyric Opera of Chicago, just a month after one world premiere, presented another.

Houses like these have been spurred by a hunger for fresh audiences that don't have any particular devotion to "Aida" or "La Traviata." But it hasn't always been smooth sailing. Creaking into development mode is a huge shift for institutions that have, for decades, almost solely done works from the distant past.

And in Lyric's premiere here on Friday, "Proximity," the company gave itself an even more ambitious assignment than one new commission: three of them, by three composer-librettist pairs, sharing a single evening. Moreover, each opera takes on a different capital-I Issue, dealing with our closeness to and dependence on others: gun violence in Chicago; the difficulty of connection in a world mediated by technology; and the threat we pose to our planet.

That this unwieldy idea ended up being stageworthy — sober, often blunt, sometimes meditative, sometimes listless, sometimes aggressively affecting — is largely because of the production's ingenious director, Yuval Sharon.

In shows like his "La Bohème," which presented the opera's

four acts in reverse, Sharon has proved himself adept at executing thorny, even silly-sounding concepts in ways that end up being surprisingly clever and moving. With "Proximity," he avoided the obvious decision to play the three pieces one after the other, à la Puccini's "Il Trittico."

Instead, Sharon showed them off to better effect by putting them in closer, well, proximity: weaving them together, alternating scenes from the operas in a two-act evening. So, for example, the final half-hour of Act I brings the audience from a stylized Chicago L ride in "Four Portraits" (music by Caroline Shaw; text by Shaw and Jocelyn Clarke) to a realistic funeral in "The Walkers" (Daniel Bernard Roumain; Anna Deavere Smith), to the abstract poetry of "Night" (John Luther Adams; John Haines).

Caroline Shaw and Jocelyn Clarke's "Four Portraits," in Yuval Sharon's production, features a stylized ride on Chicago's elevated train system.Todd Rosenberg

With the edges of the scores smoothed by the conductor, Kazem Abdullah, and Lyric's excellent orchestra, the three sound worlds play nicely together, with a shared grounding in repeating, minimal motifs, steady tonality and sensible, self-effacing lyricism — no earworm melodies, but no harshness, either, and hardly any look-at-me virtuosity.

For a flexible set, the production designers Jason H. Thompson and Kaitlyn Pietras have stretched an LED screen

across the stage floor and, halfpipe-style, up the backdrop. The screen is filled with spiffy and colorful imagery: slowly panning Chicago streetscapes seen from above; vast vistas of outer space; pulsating visualizations of communications networks. Without unwieldy scene changes, the three operas blend into a single performance with impressive seamlessness.

It helps that Sharon, the artistic director of Detroit Opera, is experienced with collaborations (and logistics) even more complicated than this. For "Hopscotch" — presented in 2015 by the Industry, the experimental company he founded in California — audience members got into cars that drove around Los Angeles, and six composers and six writers shared billing.

And his job is made easier here in Chicago by the fact that these are not three roughly equal installments, like the ones in "Il Trittico." "The Walkers," at an hour, is longer than "Four Portraits" and "Night" combined, so those shorter pieces naturally feel like interludes, breaking up a work that would otherwise dominate the threesome.

And none of the three tells a story so realistic or sustained

that it feels jolting to interrupt. The libretto of “The Walkers” is the latest in Smith’s long career of creating politically charged dramatic texts drawn from interviews she has conducted — in this case, with people she was introduced to through Chicago CRED and Choose to Change, organizations devoted to addressing gun violence in the city.

Some passages from the interviews are sung as lamenting monologues, in the style of TED Talks; some remain spoken, with light underscoring. Quirks of speech — “you know,” “uh” — are preserved in a bit of naturalism that, especially when sung, is also endearingly strange.

But some confusion is introduced because Smith and Roumain have, alongside these somber, stand-alone statements, embedded a loosely developed, difficult-to-follow plot about a gang rivalry, formed from composites of interview subjects. However impassioned the soprano Kearstin Piper Brown may be, it’s hard to make the plight of her roughly sketched character — who is targeted for killing after she is wrongly assumed to have shot a child — as clear or compelling as the plain-spoken truth of the longer monologues.

The score is least convincing in slouchily rhythmic, singsong passages with drum kit. But Roumain pulls his orchestra back to a mellow steady-state undercurrent for the monologues, emphasizing the clarity of the text above all.

And the funeral scene near the end of Act I is a persuasive Requiem, with lightly neo-Baroque solemnity and some stirring arias, including ones for the noble-toned baritone Norman Garrett and the shining tenor Issachah Savage as two of the figures who “walk” among vulnerable youth and attempt to guide them.

The first of Shaw’s “Four Portraits” conveys a relationship between characters named only A (the countertenor John Holiday) and B (the baritone Lucia Lucas) that is stymied by an inability to connect: The call literally won’t go through.

Shaw’s instrumental textures — ethereal strings; pricks of brasses and winds; sprightly pizzicato plucking; Minimalism-derived repetitions, more tentative than relentless — support a babble of fractured voices representing the technological ether, a conceit Nico Muhly explored in his 2011 opera “Two Boys.” Here and in the second section, that crowded L ride, the dramaturgy is hazy, the music bland.

The last two sections are more interesting and beautiful, with troubled darknesses under the surface serenity. Shaw renders a car’s GPS as an electronically processed voice that veers from turn-left instructions to poetic flights, yielding to an introspective aria just right for Lucas’s tender voice.

And in the final “portrait,” Lucas and Holiday, his tone

floating into a soar, at last encounter each other without barriers, the music grandly building as a choir makes a trademark Shaw sound: a kind of modest, sliding low hum. (While Carlos J. Soto's street clothes in "The Walkers" are an agile mixture of everyday and fanciful, the shapeless gray robes in "Four Portraits" do neither singer any favors.)

Zoie Reams as the Erda-like narrator of John Luther Adams and John Haines's "Night."Todd Rosenberg

The most disappointing of the three pieces is the 12-minute "Night," a monotonous and clotted score from Adams, a usually inventive composer whose sonic depictions of ocean depths and parched, flickering deserts have been uncannily evocative. Here, his mezzo-soprano Sibyl (Katherine DeYoung, filling in for an ill Zoie Reams), like Erda in Wagner's "Ring," is a kind of earth goddess offering gnomic warning about a coming reckoning. Lowered from the flies and walking amid images of planets and stars, she is interrupted for stretches by a stentorian chorus.

It's a dreary way to end the first act. The second comes to a close in more powerful, if also emotionally manipulative, fashion, with the last scene of "The Walkers." Singing the first-person account of Yasmine Miller, whose 20-month-old baby was killed in a 2020 shooting, Whitney Morrison's gentle soprano is a little timid and tremulous. But the story is so obviously heartbreaking, and her performance so sincere,

that criticizing her feels like actually criticizing a grieving mother.

Mustering a warmly supportive chorus and a clichéd, echoey faux-choral keyboard effect, this finale is almost orgiastically sentimental, down to Miller's smiling story about the new child she's pregnant with and a quotation ascribed to Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey emblazoned on the screen: "For Black people, hope has to be resurrected every day."

Treacle is, of course, hardly foreign to opera. But bending real tragedy into thin uplift is.

Proximity

Through April 8 at the Lyric Opera House, Chicago; lyricopera.org.