



Concert Review: Odyssey Opera's "The Chronicle of Nine"

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Megan Pachecano and Eric Casey in Odyssey Opera's concert version of *The Chronicle of Nine: The Tragedy of Queen Jane*. Photo: Kathy Wittman.

Last week was a good one for Odyssey Opera. On Sunday, the company netted its first Grammy. Then, on Saturday, it continued its Tudor-themed season with the world premiere of Arnold Rosner's 1984 opera *The Chronicle of Nine: The Tragedy of Queen Jane* at Jordan Hall.

The Chronicle of Nine tells of the short life and reign of Lady Jane Grey, who succeeded her cousin, Edward VI (the only son of Henry VIII), on his death in 1553. Hers was a short tenure, lasting just nine days and ending with her execution, by the order of the so-called Bloody Mary, on the scaffold in early 1554.

To be sure, this is a story worthy of the stage and Rosner's score captures its big and subtle moments with real understanding.

He's a tough composer to pigeonhole. Born in 1945, Rosner essentially rejected the Serialist dogmas of his day, drawing, instead, upon the models of Medieval and Renaissance music, as well as the 20th-century's rich, tonal symphonic tradition for his own output.

Yet his music is hardly derivative. This is certainly true of *Chronicle*. Yes, there are clear nods to modality and Elizabethan lute songs. And echoes of Shostakovich and Vaughan Williams at their most cinematic catch the ear here and there.

All of these allusions, though, serve dramatic ends and, taken together, craft a singular musical voice. The richly modal prelude to Act 1, for instance, with its floating string lines and harp arpeggios conjures up the 16th century well enough. But its harmonies are scourged by pungent dissonances that portend something seriously amiss.

Likewise, Rosner's writing in each act is strongly contrapuntal, metrically unpredictable, and idiomatically scored. The music is marked by constantly shifting colors, a strong sense of rhythm, and a healthy dose of lyricism. The last is especially impressive given the opera's largely prose-like libretto by Florence Stevenson: a couple of odd repetitions of phrase notwithstanding, all of *Chronicle*'s vocal parts dance nimbly and naturally.

Would that the same qualities were matched by Stevenson's contribution (which was adapted from her stage play of the same name). Its biggest problem is that its first two acts consist almost entirely of explicatory dialogue that only serves to move the plot forward, rather than meaningfully delve into the emotions or lives of any of the characters.

The result is that most of the cast come across as one-dimensional caricatures: either villains (Jane's parents and her in-laws), righteous conspirators (the Earls of Arundel and Pembroke), or innocent waifs (Jane). True, this helps clarify the story's various conspiracies – but it comes at a cost.

Thankfully, Act 3 redeems much of *Chronicle*'s action: here we finally get some insights into Jane, her husband Guilford, and even Queen Mary. If only Acts 1 and 2 had dug so deep.

As is the case with many operas that suffer from similar textual discrepancies, though, *Chronicle* is saved by Rosner's beguiling score. Indeed, Saturday's performance made as strong a case for his music as *Odyssey* (or the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, which co-produced the performance) has made for anyone's.

The night's uniformly strong cast was headlined by Megan Pachecano as Lady Jane Grey. She's got a lovely, silver-toned voice and her singing on Saturday was equally precise in intonation and diction. A capable actress, Pachecano drew out as much from Jane's passive appearances in Acts 1 and 2 (where she's largely a pawn of her conniving parents and in-laws) as one might have hoped – maybe more: hers was a character clearly uncomfortable with her circumstances, yet unable to resist the course of events.



David Salsbery Fry, James Demler, William Hite, and Aaron Engbreth in Odyssey Opera's concert version of *The Chronicle of Nine: The Tragedy of Queen Jane*.
Photo: Kathy Wittman.

As Jane's ill-fated husband, Guilford, Eric Carey's sweet-toned, lyric tenor matched Pachecano's beautifully. The two exhibited winning chemistry, as well, in their third-act duet.

William Hite provided a steely presence as the conniving Henry Grey. His part was well balanced by Rebecca Krouner's dusky-voiced turn as Henry's imperious wife, Frances.

Their opposite numbers, Aaron Engbreth and Krista River, were a convincingly scheming duo as Guilford's parents, John and Lady Dudley (respectively).

Similarly, James Demler's Arundel and David Salsbery Fry's Pembroke proved onyx-hued pro-Marian plotters.

As the much-maligned Queen Mary, Stephanie Kacoyanis sang with regal bearing and a dark, majestic tone. Mary's not the most naturally sympathetic of Tudor characters, but Kacoyanis disclosed a touch of humanity in her portrayal: one believed this Mary was genuinely conflicted about allowing Jane's execution to proceed

Singing the part of “a minstrel,” Gene Stenger brought a clarion voice and ruddy tone to his monologues that opened each act.

Presiding over it all was Gil Rose.

He drew playing of atmosphere and character from the Odyssey Opera Orchestra in each of the searching preludes that begins each act as well as the “Wedding Ballet” that falls in the middle of Act 1. Balances with the vocalists were, generally, carefully calibrated and the score’s high-intensity moments – Jane’s Act 2 presentation to the council and the potent Act 3 duet between Jane and Mary, accompanied only by orchestral cellos – spoke powerfully.

Throughout *Chronicle*, Rosner’s writing for brass and percussion is nothing short of brilliant. Saturday’s account was anchored by radiant playing from principal trumpet Terry Everson and the all-star percussion section of Craig McNutt, Robert Schulz, Nick Tolle, and Matt Sharrock.

The Odyssey Opera Chorus acquitted themselves grandly, the men singing their Act 2 roles crisply and the full ensemble delivering the increasingly chromatic, disoriented “Cries of London” bit near the end of Act 3 with furious, intensifying menace.