

# OPERA NEWS

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## Picker: *Fantastic Mr. Fox*



**CD** River, Futral, T. Davis; Brancy, Craig Brown, Vega, Presser, Nemzer; Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Rose, Text. BMOP/sound 1065 (2)



**IT'S TAKEN TOBIAS PICKER'S** second opera more than twenty years to make it to CD, but here it is at last in all its charm and considerable glory. Over the years, *Fantastic Mr. Fox* has expanded and contracted according to resources available: the original LA Opera staging with Gerald Finley (sporting the title character's whiskers) was sizable, but a seven-instrument reduction has been a hit at London's Opera Holland Park. This Boston Modern Orchestra Project recording of a 2014 staging utilizes an orchestra of fifty-one (though Picker is sensitively sparing to voices, rarely letting his full instrumental forces become overwhelming).

Based on a book by British author Roald Dahl, the opera tells the story of a vulpine family's triumph over adversity thanks to dad's legendary cunning and a whole lot of pulling together. Their adversaries—the loathsome triumvirate of farmers Boggis, Bunce and Bean—try hard and fail to stop their *pestilent foes* (though at times things look touch-and-go, especially when Mr. Fox loses his splendidly bushy tail).

Picker's trump card is his ability to write a catchy tune while employing a sufficiently sophisticated compositional language to hold a grown-up's interest and never, ever talking down to his audience, one that he rightly assumes will be made up of both children and adults. The wicked farmers in their shabby yard patter along, their spiky harmonies skipping over syncopations and motoric rhythms. By contrast, warmer, more Romantic tones accompany the foxes' idyllic habitat. If Picker occasionally seems to quote the odd fragment of a familiar tune, it's never ungainly or inappropriate.

Donald Sturrock's witty libretto is

equally satisfying, rising from rude rhymes to moments of quiet profundity. "Ah, the smell of night! Dark, warm and full of the promise of adventure!" sings Mr. Fox. "Sleep falls away as the night begins to work her spell! As men go home, the woods begin to stir! In burrows, hollows, cavities and holes, the animals awake! This is their hour! My hour!" See what I mean?

John Brancy's vigorous, conversational baritone is perfect for Mr. Fox, and his long opening aria (far from simplistic) is full of the joys of spring. As the feisty Mrs. Fox, Krista River offers a warm mezzo-soprano with all the necessary high notes and just the right degree of vocal swoon to touch the heart as Picker explores their mutually supportive marriage. As the malevolent Boggis, Bunce and Bean, Andrew Craig Brown, Edwin Vega and Gabriel Presser have a great deal of fun.

In smaller roles, Elizabeth Futral makes a touching Miss Hedgehog, her wistful aria a highlight, while Andrey Nemzer's plangent countertenor lends a baleful quality to Agnes, the terrifying digging machine. (Her clangorous, brassy music with splashy percussion is another marvelous Picker touch.) Tynan Davis nearly steals the show as Rita, a philosophical, klezmer-inflected rat. The four fox cubs—Abigail Long, Abi Tenenbaum, Zoe Tekeian and Madeleine Kline—are as musically adept as they are vocally enchanting.

The chorus of trees is less than dramatically effective (though they're neatly sung by the Boston Children's Chorus), but with lively sound and decent engineering there's much to enjoy here. The CD is worth it just for Emily Carew Woodard's mischievous "Fox on Bike" cover image. —Clive Paget