

- OPERA
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A By [HEIDI WALESON](#)

Liebestod to Die For

Dallas

Composers interested in writing operas should study the oeuvre of Dominick Argento, whose "The Aspern Papers" (1988) recently had a splendid new production at the Dallas Opera, the company that commissioned it and gave the work its world premiere. Mr. Argento writes his own librettos, and his predominantly tonal music makes text intelligibility paramount while maintaining its own distinctive profile.

In "The Aspern Papers," Mr. Argento skillfully opens up the Henry James novella, adding a backstory and more characters, so that past and present coexist and collide. In the novella, the narrator, a scholar of the long-dead poet Jeffrey Aspern, insinuates himself into the household of Juliana Bordereau, the poet's aged former lover, to try and secure the valuable papers that may be in her possession. Mr. Argento moves the action from Venice to Lake Como, Italy, makes Aspern a composer and Juliana an opera singer; key among the papers is the manuscript of a never-heard opera, "Medea," that disappeared after the composer drowned in 1835.

The action alternates seamlessly between 1835 and 1885, gradually revealing the long-ago trauma of infidelity and death that turned Juliana into a recluse, hoarding her lover's final creation. While some of the vocal writing is overly declamatory—particularly for the Lodger, strongly portrayed in Dallas by Nathan Gunn—the subtly scored orchestra and the tautly written ensembles demonstrate a firm grasp of theatrical pacing and variety.

The most potently written character is Tina, Juliana's repressed spinster niece, inhabited here with great presence by Susan Graham. Tina has four standout arias, tracing her awakening to life and feeling after years in the shadows, as the Lodger seduces her to get access to the papers. (Their a cappella duet at the end of Act I is an ingenious piece of writing.) As Juliana, the fierce Alexandra Deshorties slipped easily from embodying the young opera diva, warbling bel canto-style coloratura, to the old crone. Joseph Kaiser was a sturdy-voiced, dashing Aspern; Sasha Cooke was sweet as the ingénue Sonia, who steals Aspern's heart and breaks Juliana's.

Graeme Jenkins, in his final performance as the company's music director, steadily paced Mr. Argento's mercurial orchestrations, which ranged from the delicate chimes that transported us into the past to grandly colorful, Debussy-like effusions. Tim Albery's production astutely captured the opera's cinematic travels through time; **Constance Hoffman's costumes and Thomas Hase's lighting helped differentiate the eras against set designer Andrew Lieberman's moldering villa walls.**

The production also kept the parallels clear: For the final scenes, the walls disappeared, revealing the lake and a small fire pit in the foreground. The 1835 Juliana and the 1885 Tina first hoard and finally burn the opera manuscript, which the men who have betrayed them value most. These are Pyrrhic victories, but the only ones these women have.

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.

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