

Dallas Morning News

Center Stage

A splendid Dallas Opera revival of Argento's "The Aspern Papers"



By [Scott Cantrell/Classical Music Critic](#)

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A quarter century after the Dallas Opera's world premiere of American composer Dominick Argento's *The Aspern Papers*, the opera was back onstage Friday night. Once again, the company served it up with a world-class cast, now with a subtly imaginative staging by Tim Albery and eloquent playing by the Dallas Opera Orchestra under departing music director Graeme Jenkins. Spotlit in the Winspear Opera House audience at the end, the 85-year-old composer was applauded as enthusiastically as the cast.

Two hours' worth of music, in two acts, the opera tells a harrowing story adapted from the Henry James novella. The orchestral writing is extraordinarily beautiful, in the traditions of Barber and Britten. After runs in Dallas, Washington, San Francisco, Germany and Sweden, the opera disappeared, but the new production argues strongly for revival.

As his own librettist, Argento moved the setting from Venice to Lake Como, and changed James' poet into a composer whose opera based on the Medea legend disappears. Argento switches back and forth across five decades (an improbable six in the original libretto) to explore a thicket of exploitations.

In 1835, we see Juliana Bordereau as a young diva for whom Aspern has composed his opera. But having left the impresario Barelli to become Aspern's flame, she is sidelined by Aspern's infatuation with another young singer, Sonia.

Aspern drowns while attempting to swim to Sonia across the lake. Betrayed and bereft, Juliana renounces her career to become the bitter old women we meet 50 years on. Attended by her spinster niece Tina, she jealously guards Aspern's manuscript.

A writer identified only as *The Lodger* shows up seeking Aspern's papers, flirting with Tina to get access to them. The ending is quite a surprise, not to be spoiled here.

For all the post-romantic lushness of the orchestral writing, don't expect to walk out humming tunes. Vocal lines have the naturalness of speech inflexions, but little in the way of traditional melody. Vocal-ensemble writing is cleverly crafted, and superbly executed by these singers, but arguably overindulged. *The Lodger's* narration of the Medea legend in the opening of the second act overstays its welcome.

The cast's clear diction is as impressive as its vocalism. Susan Graham, in a belated Dallas Opera debut, sings stirringly and poignantly as Tina, vividly portraying an increasingly conflicted figure. It's hard for one singer to be equally persuasive as a young and old Juliana, but Alexandra Deshorties sings beautifully and expressively.

Nathan Gunn perfectly balances solidity and urgency as The Lodger, dispensing a chocolately-rich baritone. Joseph Kaiser has the ardor—sometimes too much—and fine lyric tenor for Aspern. Sasha Cooke's radiant soprano is perfect for Sonia, with Dean Peterson and Eric Jordan sonorous as, respectively, Barelli and a Painter. The offstage chorus, prepared by Alexander Rom, supplies atmospheric oohs and ahs.

Designer Andrew Lieberman's spare, crumbling 19th-century interior progressively opens up until only a piano and a few chairs are left in front of a blue-gray cyclorama; **deft lighting is by Thomas Hase**. Period costumes are by Constance Hoffman.

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Repeats at 2 p.m. Sunday and April 28, and 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Saturday at Winspear Opera House, 2403 Flora. \$19 to \$225. 214-443-1000, dallasopera.org.