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Helios debut full of promise

By **Matthew Guerrieri** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 30, 2012

CAMBRIDGE - The local operatic circle of life is turning toward the ancient and modest. Over the weekend, a month after Opera Boston's self-extinguishment, Helios Early Opera debuted its first full operatic staging, of Marc-Antoine Charpentier's 1688 "David et Jonathas." The production itself was longer on ambition and enthusiasm than polish and spectacle, but the effort and evident talent were good operatic karma for a city that could use it.

Charpentier's piece proved more than interesting enough to warrant revival. The plot comes from the Second Book of Samuel: the bond between David and Jonathan, son of the paranoid King Saul, and the tragedy of the Battle of Gilboa, David becoming king at the cost of Jonathan's life. "I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan," David biblically mourns, "thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." Charpentier's opera plays that ambiguous relationship as straight-up love story, giving the pair ravishing music, casting David and Jonathas as tenor and soprano, traditional romantic leads.

This production's strengths were musical. The orchestra, drawn from the city's deep early-music bench, was led from keyboard and gamba, respectively, by Dylan Sauerwald and Zoe Weiss. (Concertmaster Scott Metcalfe also lent a conducting hand in places.) Vigor sometimes swamped nuance, the music at times chugging along with monochromatic zest. But the stylistic and technical confidence was estimable. And the chorus, given the score's best music - Charpentier pouring forth startlingly rich harmonies - responded with pure-toned clarity.

Soprano Linda Tsatsanis centered her portrayal of Jonathas in sheer vocal proficiency, a bright, flexible voice, big but controlled, shaded with plentiful color. As David, tenor Owen McIntosh was a fine match, his clarion instrument supported by both sure musical instincts and stage presence.

Keith Lam provided Achis, the Philistine general, with a suave, fine-grained baritone that was sometimes trumped by First Church's cavernous acoustic. As the Iago-like Joadab, Márcio de Oliveira balanced a light, lyrical sound with efficiently villainous character, physically clear and effective. Jacob Cooper was the opposite, playing Saul as a scenery-chewing combination of Richard Nixon and restless toddler, hunched and twisted, and with a twitchiness - and a dark, brassy voice occasionally undermined by the nonstop tics.

Costumes and set were on a minimal, less-is-more basis - though, in practice, Aria Umezawa's staging strained to make more out of less, business, and busyness, filling up spaces that didn't need filling. In places, it actually emphasized the opera's essentially tableaux-like construction, visual distractions diluting the music's ability to carry through such stop-and-sing scenes. (And it was not the best decision to stage the Battle of Gilboa like a high school production of "West Side Story.")

But when the staging was simplest, when the music was in the foreground, the drama turned vivid. David and Jonathas's breakup on the eve of battle was affecting and beautifully sung; the chorus's Act 2 serenade to the pair, processing across the space, was beguiling, as was their encomium over the fallen Jonathas. In moments like that, Helios's potential was tangible - and hopeful.