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Review: André Previn's 'Brief Encounter' premieres in Houston

2:46 PM, May 3, 2009



Long ago, [André Previn](#) had a brief affair with Houston. In 1967, he gave up his successful Hollywood life as a film composer and jazz pianist to become music director of the Houston Symphony. This was his steppingstone to a major career in classical music, but after two seasons, his artistic ambitions for the orchestra and his lifestyle (he cohabited with Mia Farrow before they married) met with civic disapproval.

Friday night and four decades later, Previn was back in town and once more a big deal in Texas. The [Houston Grand Opera](#) presented the world premiere of "Brief Encounter." If F. Scott Fitzgerald was correct when he said that there were no second acts in American lives, perhaps an often-entrancing new opera gave Texas Gov. Rick Perry one more reason to advance his secessionist argument. Then again it is hard to think of any American musician whose life and career has had more acts than Previn's.

"Brief Encounter" is to a certain extent a brief encounter with Previn, who turned 80 last month and who stood at his seat in the Brown Theater of the Wortham Center rather than walk on stage with his canes to take a bow. No single work could encapsulate all of Previn, but this opera relates to a surprising number of his sides, past and present (mostly past).

Previn left Houston for England, where he honed his classical credentials as music director of the London Symphony and became a notable champion of mid-20th-century British music, much of which had fallen out of fashion. "Brief Encounter" is based on the 1945 David Lean film, a famed British tearjerker about a housewife, Laura, and general practitioner, Alec, who meet by chance at a suburban train station, fall in love but do the right thing and separate quickly and sadly, remaining with their spouses. They are proper Britons, so no sex please, which is part of the film's poignancy.

Heartbreak in the film is accompanied by Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. The background music gave Rachmaninoff a huge popular following at the time but ultimately hurt the Russian composer's reputation by association. Rachmaninoff is another composer Previn, a quarter of a century later, helped bring back into fashion.

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The opera itself was the suggestion of Previn's fifth wife, the glamorous German violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, in 2006, shortly before they split up. Mutter, with whom Previn currently performs in a trio and for whom he still composes, was seated next to the composer at Friday's premiere.

And though Houston once put an end to Previn's involvement with film (a divorce that he enforced during his ultimately unhappy tenure as Los Angeles Philharmonic music director in the '80s, making a second act in L.A. difficult), he now seems more than happy to hook up with an old classic made only four years before his own first film, "The Sun Comes Up," which featured Jeannette MacDonald and Lassie.

"Brief Encounter" is very much a film turned opera. Previn and British director John Caird, who wrote the libretto and is responsible for the handsome Houston production, makes all the references clear. So does the company on many levels. Essays in the program booklet are all about how Lean translated Noël Coward's one-act "Still Life" to the screen in collaboration with the playwright and then to the modern lyric stage. Not a word, though, on Previn or his music.

If play-to-film was one level of amplification, film-to-opera is a second level. On screen, the story is told through Laura, who chatters away annoyingly in the film. Her emotions are generalized by Rachmaninoff's music but specified by Celia Johnson's eyes, upon which the camera lingers.

The opera's job is to spell everything out in easily singable lines. Caird bold-faces the theme of the passing of time, makes sure we know the lovers consummate their affair and fills in the role of Laura's affably distracted husband, Fred, so that a third character can feel sorry for himself as well. The opera adds a bit more bawdiness to the comic-foil characters of Myrtle (who operates the station tea shop) and Albert (a ticket taker).

The production, designed by Bunny Christie, is meant to remind us of the black-and-white movie. The original time and place are maintained. The opera is in 23 brief scenes (divided into two acts) and quick transformations from station to a river's bridge and other locales appear as effortless and commonplace as quick cutting would on the screen.

On the surface, Previn accommodates Caird's conventionalism. A big station clock dominates the set, and the opera opens with it chiming 3. But from then on Previn's music does not so much define the opera as enigmatically float through it. He taps into his love of Vaughn Williams' pastoral sound and he adds some Russianisms (the horns change nationalities as though at the flick of a switch). He may underscore what the characters say or feel, but he doesn't spell out time and place. His real genius here is to, like a film composer, set a mood and, like a jazz musician, let the music take him where it will.

What is a quote from Bernstein's "Candide" doing there? I suspect for no other reason than that it works. When Previn trusts his musical instincts, he can get away with anything.

The Houston cast was more impressive than appropriate. "Brief Encounter" would work, I think, far better as a chamber opera, but Brown Theater is a grand space. Elizabeth Futral's Laura was thus necessarily grandly operatic; Nathan Gunn's Alec, full of ardor. Both soprano and baritone came off more like ebullient All-Americans than reserved Brits at the end of World War II.

One oddity is that Previn snubs tenors here. Baritone Kim Josephson was a warm-enough Fred. Baritone Robert Orth was a lively, cockney Albert. But no one sounded lower than Meredith Arwady, a true contralto, who was not entirely comfortable as the prim Myrtle but whose voice boomed through the theater like thunder. Rebekah Camm was the prattling Dolly who spoiled the lovers' goodbye. Patrick Summers was the enthusiastic conductor.

The morning after the premiere, I spent a while looking at Robert Rauschenberg's 1961 "Third Time Painting" in Houston's Menil Collection. A large Bulova clock is turned on its side, and I thought it suited Previn perfectly. His great talent as a composer is to catch you unawares. In "Brief Encounter," he hooks you with a melody, turns it on its side and moves on, measure after measure feeling like a brief but significant encounter. The opera will last.

"**Brief Encounter**," Houston Grand Opera, Wortham Theater Center, Houston, Texas; 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday; \$20 to \$250; (713) 228-6737. [Houston Grand Opera](#)

-- Mark Swed

Photo: Laura (Elizabeth Futral) and Alec (Nathan Gunn) in the world premiere of André Previn's "Brief Encounter" in Houston. Credit: Felix Sanchez/Houston Grand Opera

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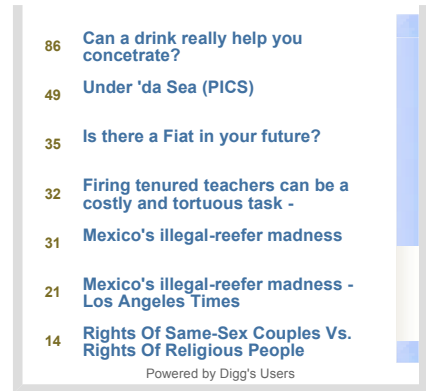
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