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Princeton Festival Presents Storm Large in “The Seven Deadly Sins”; PSO Completes Program with “Carmen Suite,” Milanov Conducts



“THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS”: Princeton Festival has opened its 2022 season with Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s “The Seven Deadly Sins.” Above: Soloist Storm Large, left, and vocal quartet Hudson Shad were accompanied by the Princeton Symphony Orchestra, which also performed Rodion Shchedrin’s “Carmen Suite.” Rossen Milanov, right, conducted the concert. *(Photo by Carolo Pascale)*

By Donald H. Sanborn III

Princeton Festival has opened its 2022 season with *The Seven Deadly Sins*. The June 10 concert featured acclaimed singer and actor Storm Large, and vocal quartet Hudson Shad. The vocalists were accompanied by the Princeton Symphony Orchestra, which completed the program with *Carmen Suite*. The performance took place in a large tent on the grounds of Morven Museum & Garden.

The entire program was conducted by the orchestra's Edward T. Cone Music Director Rossen Milanov. This concert marks the first collaboration between Princeton Festival and the Princeton Symphony Orchestra since the two organizations merged last year.

The Seven Deadly Sins (1933) is a ballet chanté ("sung ballet") composed by Kurt Weill (1900-1950). The work marks Weill's final collaboration with playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), whose German libretto has been translated into English by W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman.

Edward James, a wealthy British poet, commissioned the work. James stipulated that it must include his wife, dancer Tilly Losch, whom he thought to resemble singer Lotte Lenya (Weill's wife), for whom the composer was writing the piece.

This resulted in the core concept of a split-personality plot, in which Anna I (the singer) obeys the demands of her family (an all-male vocal quartet). Anna II (the dancer) initially is resistant, though she reluctantly defers to Anna I.

The title ironically refers to the fact that the wholesome, idealistic Anna II is perceived as committing the "sins," and is redirected by the worldly Anna I. The piece, which premiered in Paris the year that the Nazis rose to power, can be viewed as a meditation on authoritarian indoctrination.

Since 2013, Large has been one of the composition's foremost interpreters, having sung it at Carnegie Hall in the first of several performances with the Detroit Symphony. In performing the work, Large has been collaborating with Hudson Shad since the 2014 Ojai Music Festival.

A versatile performer and writer, Large has created an autobiographical musical memoir, *Crazy Enough*. She has been performing with the band Pink Martini since 2011, and appears on their album *Get Happy*.

Hudson Shad includes Mark Bleeke (tenor), Eric Edlund (baritone), Peter Becker (bass/baritone), and Wilbur Pauley (bass). Princeton Festival is a homecoming for Bleeke and Pauley, both of whom are graduates of Westminster Choir College.

Hudson Shad immediately joined the orchestra on stage; Large delayed her entrance until Anna I sings. This performance did not have a dancer, nor was one needed. Large has the stage presence and acting skills to add abundant visual interest.

The Seven Deadly Sins opens with an aloof march, in which the woodwinds are prominent. Large enters, carrying a handbag. A dark overcoat covers a silky, silvery dress.

In the Prologue, Anna I explains that she and her "sister" Anna II have been sent from Louisiana by their parents and brothers, to travel to multiple cities and earn enough money for the family to "build a little home, down by the Mississippi." Anna I contemptuously sings of Anna II, "She's just a little mad, my head is on straight. But we're really one divided being." A sturdy mezzo-soprano, Large immediately demonstrates her ability to caress a musical phrase, and convey layered emotions.

In the up-tempo first movement, "Sloth," the family — which serves as a Greek chorus, commenting on Anna's progress — describes Anna as "lazybones" though they also refer to her as a "respectful child" who "did what she was told." When the singing pauses, the orchestra continues the muttering. The musical language changes for a chorale in which the family prays, "Incline her heart to serve all Thy commandments that her works on earth may prosper."

The family's attitude toward Anna immediately makes us angry on her behalf, but the blending of the quartet's voices with the orchestra (and with Large), particularly with live acoustics, is exquisite. As the family sings, Anna pours herself several drinks. Her facial expressions, as she wordlessly reacts to the family's words, speak volumes.

"Pride" is a sweeping waltz in which Anna describes a cabaret job in Memphis. Anna I chides Anna II for trying to turn the cabaret performing into an "art." During an orchestral interlude, Large removes the overcoat and sensually moves to the music. Anna I tartly remarks, "Leave your pride to those who can well afford it. Do what you are asked to do and not what you want, for that isn't what is wanted."

In "Anger," the family complains that the money Anna has earned is insufficient to build a house. Anna I scolds Anna II for letting her anger at injustice distract her from working. Several lines in the movement are set to one note; the repetition suggests indoctrination.

"Gluttony" features the quartet, as Anna's family worries she is gaining too much weight to be attractive. "Lust," is a slower movement whose smooth, tender music contrasts with the nasty bite to the text. Anna I forces Anna II to forget her "lust" (actually, genuine love) for Fernando, a poor man who loves her; and return to a rich man, Edward.

Anna is popular in Baltimore, and the family expresses concern that she could spoil her success with too much "Greed." The final movement, "Envy," opens with deceptive slowness, as Anna I describes Anna II's exhaustion in San Francisco, the final town. The music becomes a brisk, militant march; while putting the overcoat back on, Anna I warns her "sister" not to be envious of those who are able to have a life of ease and be "true to their loved ones."

Large lets the movement's angry energy erupt with the line "Those who were bad are rejected forever, gnashing their teeth..." singing it with a fierce, guttural belt. The musical language becomes placid in the Epilogue, in which Anna journeys to the "little home" in Louisiana, concluding her seven-year odyssey.

Paul Kilsdonk's lighting, for both *The Seven Deadly Sins* and *Carmen Suite*, adds visual interest, subtly but noticeably changing to fit the mood of each passage.

In *The Seven Deadly Sins*, Anna II is forced to leave a poor man for a wealthy one. In Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), the title character is killed for her choice of lover. Almost a century after the opera's premiere, composer Rodion Shchedrin (born 1932) wrote *Carmen Suite* (1967), a ballet choreographed by Alberto Alonso. The work premiered at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre.

Shchedrin arranged Bizet's melodies for strings and percussion. That the ballet has its own viewpoint becomes clear the moment that Milanov slowly, deliberately raises his arms to give the downbeat. Whereas the opera opens with a triumphal march, the ballet begins introspectively. The "Habanera" (arguably Carmen's signature theme) is invoked by chimes.

Later, the "Habanera" is one of the few melodies to be heard entirely as Bizet wrote it; it becomes a fun volley between the strings and percussion. Smooth, seamless phrasing characterizes the performances, especially for the strings.

The showy "Toreador" ("Torero") song, and the triumphal march that opens the opera, are recognizable; but they are interrupted with quieter, reflective material. Shchedrin lets the chimes close the ballet with the "Habanera," bookending it in an elegy.

Just as Large's stage presence distinguishes *The Seven Deadly Sins*, Milanov's conducting distinguishes *Carmen Suite*. In the quietest segments, Milanov barely moves; the slightest hint of a hand motion is enough to elicit the sound he wants. In more impassioned segments the conductor sways, his arms seeming to literally embrace the music. The orchestra reflects this passion, conveying it to the audience.

Watching that happen is an experience that a recording, or even a video, cannot fully replicate. Princeton Festival's opening night let the audience revel in the fact that live music — for now, at least — has returned. That is a good reason to be festive.

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