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Songs of a Pilot Crashing

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Over the years the conductor Leon Botstein has received well-deserved credit for programming many overlooked 20th-century works in his concerts with the American Symphony Orchestra. But he has paid a price, as was evident in the poor attendance for Mr. Botstein's latest adventure in programming at Avery Fisher Hall on Friday night.

The program, intimidatingly titled "Persecution and Hope: Masterworks of Conscience," offered concert performances of two one-act operas by the Italian modernist Luigi Dallapiccola: "Volo di Notte" (1939) and "Il Prigioniero" (1948). It is baffling that these arresting operas, each less than an hour long, with librettos by Dallapiccola, are so seldom heard in the United States. The admirably curious concertgoers gave a long ovation to Mr. Botstein, who conducted generally strong performances; the orchestra, which played with lush sound and dramatic sweep; the fine solo singers; and the excellent Concert Chorale of New York.

Dallapiccola, who died in 1975, has never been able to shed the label "12-tone composer," which will always put off segments of the audience. An avowed anti-Fascist, he became the leading exponent of 12-tone techniques and serialism in Italy. Yet following the example of Alban Berg, Dallapiccola combined serialism with elements of tonality to give his scores an elusive harmonic allure. And you cannot be an Italian composer, it would seem, without acquiring a feeling for Italianate lyricism, which Dallapiccola had in abundance.

Based on a novel by the French writer and aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, "Volo di Notte" ("Night Flight") tells of Rivière, the director of an air postal company in Argentina. With almost Nietzschean willpower, Rivière lives in the present and executes his duties, oblivious to both the dangers his pilots face and his own moral qualms.

The opera's main action takes place offstage, as Fabien, a pilot, tries to navigate his plane through a

terrible storm and winds up crashing. In a dramatic stroke that intensifies the horror, we hear only the pilot's transmissions from the cockpit as sung by a radio telegrapher.

The music moves in inexorable waves of wrenching harmonies that often have a luminous glow, as if the opera were a passion play. The dialogue is delivered in volatile yet always singable vocal lines. The baritone Richard Zeller was a stentorian Rivière. The tenor Peter Tantsits, as a young pilot; the tenor Scott Williamson, as the distressed radio telegrapher; and the bass Charles Perry Sprawls, as an officious inspector, all gave solid performances. The soprano Lori Phillips was the emotional center of the performance in a short but crucial scene as the aggrieved wife of the downed pilot.

"Il Prigioniero" ("The Prisoner") tells a simple but horrific story. A Spaniard imprisoned during the Inquisition is befriended by a solicitous jailer who calls him brother, "fratello." After luring the prisoner into a state of hope, the jailer is revealed to be the Grand Inquisitor himself.

Throughout this gritty, bleak and astringent score, it is impossible to resist the sheer dramatic thrust and entrancing harmonic richness of the music. In the daunting role of the prisoner, the baritone David Pittman-Jennings sang with an affecting balance of dignity and torment. The tenor Donald Kaasch was the unctuous, eerie jailer. And Ms. Phillips, again impressive, brought formidable vocal power and desperation to her portrayal of the prisoner's mother, who is allowed to visit him in the opening scene.

Given his avowed interest in 20th-century opera James Levine should bring this Dallapiccola double bill to the Metropolitan Opera. If that happens, Mr. Botstein will have pointed the way with this significant, if underattended, concert.