

Our Town, Opera Review  
From 02/25/06, for 02/27 and 02/29  
George Walker, WFIU

(music WFIU CD-5949 tk. 9 “Sing, my soul...” Ned Rorem)

“Our Town,” Thornton Wilder’s venerable theater classic, is having its operatic world premiere at the IU Opera Theater with music by Ned Rorem and libretto by J.D. McClatchy. Friday and Saturday night’s performances were especially celebratory with composer and librettist participating in a preshow panel, sitting in the audience and joining the cast for the curtain call.

Many composers had approached Thornton Wilder for permission to make an opera of “Our Town,” but he refused them all. Wilder even turned down Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein. In part at the urging of librettist J.D. McClatchy, Wilder’s nephew Tappan Wilder, the Literary Executor of the Estate agreed to the project and to Ned Rorem as its composer.

There have been some changes to make “Our Town” into an opera. The narrator, Saturday night’s Christopher Wilburn, is still prominent, and the town of Grover’s Corners does get a good deal of attention, but it is now the story of the young lovers, George Gibbs, Cody Fosdick, and Emily Webb, Carolina Castells, that becomes the focus. We do still have the Gibbs’s, Dr. Gibbs, Robert Samels and Mrs. Gibbs, Courtney Crouse. The Webbs, Editor Webb, Samuel Spade, and Mrs. Webb, Elizabeth Baldwin is there as well. Simon Stinson, Chester Pidduck, the drunken choir director is still an example of an artistic type who perhaps shouldn’t have lived in such a small town. Mrs. Soames, Rachel Rose, picks up lines for the rest of the town. Rorem and McClatchy cut two-thirds of the original dialogue, and left out half the play’s characters. But with the addition of the projected video settings and music, it may be the “Our Town” for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There are a few additions and changes in the order of events, but the opera is in the original three acts, each a brief forty-five minutes. Saturday night, the third act, in the cemetery, with Emily’s return to visit her childhood birthday seemed clumsy, and the act felt overly drawn out. The aria with Emily’s childish rhyming simply sent me in a detour to the land of Dr. Seuss and the “Fox in Socks.” However, the first two acts went very well with the added drama of the music more than making up for missing words and people. Rorem’s music is varied and attractive. There are chorus parts, solos and ensembles. The sounds can smoothly move from antique hymn settings with subtly modern variation to very modern sounding harmonies and scales.

The IU Opera Theater production of “Our Town” was surely conducted by David Effron. Everyone sang well and the IU Philharmonic gave a lovely account of the score. Inventive and often invisible stage direction was by Vincent Liotta. The set and costumes were by David Higgins. Though the stage was traditionally bare, video projections on the backdrop followed the action with scenes of the town and even offered brief paragraphs of verbal commentary from the original script.

The world premiere of Ned Rorem and J.D. McClatchy’s opera “Our Town” continues with performances this Friday and Saturday at the IU Opera Theater. I think

that you are going to hear about a good number of other productions from colleges and professional companies around the country.

You can find this review along with interviews of Ned Rorem, J.D. McClatchy and Wilder nephew Tappan Wilder on our web site at [WFIU dot Indiana dot edu](http://WFIU dot Indiana dot edu).

At the opera for you, I'm George Walker