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News

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'THE GOOD SOLDIER SCHWEIK' REPORTS FOR DUTY ON DISC

Chicago Opera Theater Marches into the Studio for a World-Premiere Recording

"Brilliant Musical Theater"

Forty-four years after its premiere by the New York City Opera, American composer Robert Kurka's inventive, bittersweet comic opera *The Good Soldier Schweik* has finally appeared on a recording.

Cedille Records has released the complete opera on a two-CD set performed by the Chicago Opera Theater (Cedille Records CDR 90000 062). Based on the ensemble's acclaimed March 2001 staging, the recording presents the cast, conductor, and orchestra from that production.

This is the first recording in any format of Kurka's 1957 opera, based on Czech author Jaroslav Hasek's anti-authoritarian novel of the 1920s about the misadventures of a likeable, if seemingly dimwitted, World War I draftee.

Tenor Jason Collins sings the title role (Schweik) and baritone Marc Embree sings the prominent roles of the Army Doctor and Lt. Lukash. Other singers, all of whom perform multiple roles in the opera, are soprano Kelli Harrington; mezzo-soprano Buffy Baggott; tenors Wayne Alan Behr, Mark Calvert, Robert Boldin, and Stephen Noon; baritones Aaron Judisch, Timothy

Sharp, and Christian Elser; and bass Alvaro Ramirez. Conductor is Alexander Platt, COT's resident conductor and music advisor.

The *Chicago Tribune* hailed the company's "terrific new production . . . It is brilliant musical theater, packed with nonstop energy and lacerating wit." The *Tribune* went on to describe the opera as "a manic hybrid between 'Mahagonny,' 'Wozzeck' and 'Catch 22,' as staged by the Marx Brothers." The *Chicago Sun-Times* called the production "a brilliant marriage of music and theater." *Opera News* reported, "It would be hard to imagine a more eminently likable production of this neglected American opera."

Kurka (1921-1957) scored the music for wind band and percussion—no strings—and built his themes on marches, folk music, syncopated jazz, and a neoclassical format. The inspired instrumentation makes ironic, astringent comments on the action, while evoking military music and the aura of jazz age Bohemia.

Born in Cicero, Ill., to parents of Czech descent, Kurka grew up knowing the Schweik story, which is central to twentieth-century Czech culture. He studied violin and received a master's degree from Columbia University in 1948. Largely self-taught as a composer, he studied briefly with Otto Luening and Darius Milhaud. The recipient of prestigious awards and commissions, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1951.

In 1957, Brandeis University presented Kurka with its first Creative Arts Award "to a composer on the threshold of a promising career." Diagnosed with leukemia that same year, Kurka barely finished the opera before he died on December 12, 1957, 10 days short of his thirty-sixth birthday.

The New York City Opera gave "Schweik" its premiere on April 23, 1958, "to great acclaim," according to the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. Howard Taubman of the *New York*

Times (April 24, 1958) called it “a stylized, lively, often slapsticking commentary on a society of fools and knaves.” Irving Kolodin of the *Saturday Review* wrote that the opera “is apt to keep [Kurka’s] name alive for some time to come . . . the talent it bespeaks is considerable.”

Since then, the opera has enjoyed close to 100 different productions throughout the world in more than a dozen languages.

Cedille recorded the opera immediately following COT’s five-performance run, using positioning and blocking from the production to give listeners a sense of three-dimensional action. Kim Gunning, COT’s stage manager for the live performances, helped coordinate the singers’ movements during the recording sessions.

The recording comes with two booklets. A 56-page booklet includes a detailed track listing of scenes and songs; program notes; a scene-by-scene synopsis; a complete libretto; and artists’ profiles and portraits. A 20-page booklet offers a sequence of full-color photos from the full production, directed by Harry Silverstein, with sets by John Conklin, lighting by Chris Binder, and costumes by Kaye Voyce.

The recording was funded in part through generous grants from The Aaron Copland Fund for Music and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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