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A joyous, foxy opera

By JAMES JORDEN



In Leos Janacek's "The Cunning Little Vixen," the heroine is shot and skinned for her fur. A disturbing conclusion, yes, but also a happy ending, as the exultant music of this 1924 fantasy proves: Though one fox dies, her offspring and the rest of nature continue to thrive forever.

This theme of eternal renewal resonates even more strongly when "Vixen" is performed by young artists at the start of their careers, particularly when the singers are uniformly excellent.

For the Juilliard Opera's performance Sunday, spunky lyric soprano Julia Bullock charmed as the Vixen, so full of lively mischief you could hardly blame her for raiding a henhouse or biting the leg of a neighborhood kid.

For a while, she's the pet — or, as she sees it, the captive — of a good-hearted Forester, sung in a big, muscular bass-baritone by Aubrey Allcock. Later, the vixen takes up with a sexy male fox, clarion-voiced soprano Karen Vuong.

Their clear, unaffected English diction was a virtue shared by the more than 20 singers in the cast, who put over every witty syllable of Yveta Synek Graff's revised libretto.

Also refreshing was Emma Griffin's airy production. Instead of cutesy animal costumes, this staging imagined the forest creatures as boys and girls in summer clothes, dancing and playing games. Laura Jellinek's single set, suggesting the interior of a craftsman-style bungalow, offered nooks and crannies for hiding from encroaching humanity.

Even with the score's spiky harmonies and manic rhythms, conductor Anne Manson revealed the eerie beauty of Janacek's fleeting melodies.

So heart-wrenchingly gorgeous was the orchestral finale that it was easy to understand why the Czech composer asked that it be played at his funeral. Like Juilliard's lustrous performance, this opera is a pure affirmation of life.