

Hamlet

Composer, Brett Dean
Librettist, Matthew Jocelyn

By Carol Crocca

My impression in a nutshell after reading about half a dozen reviews: It will be innovative, it will be gripping, it will be extremely loud at times, but will have some quieter, lyrical moments. Worth seeing if you like modern opera, or have enough curiosity about the latest operatic attempt to capture the *Hamlet* drama.

It is not easy to write about an opera one hasn't seen, and I am always happy if one of the other writers has an enthusiasm for any particular new work. This is not often the case, but at least the *critics* have seen the opera. I have threaded together the following excerpts from their reviews, in the hope of conveying a balanced and helpful picture.

Vulture.com, May 16, Justin Davidson

From the first volcanic rumble oozing out of the walls in Brett Dean's opera *Hamlet*, we know we are at the bottom of a very deep crevasse: the protagonist's psyche. The score casts a strobing light on his interior world, a dark and rugged terrain full of underground bogs and jagged ridges. Percussion clatters and whispers from high ledges. Plumes of choral singing spring from unseen recesses. A contrabass clarinet growls in the pit. Mists of electronic sound drift through the house. And virtually ever present on the stage, stumbling through this projection of his haunted mind, is the Dane himself.

And the consensus is that the attempt to communicate said Dane's mental state succeeds, and the telling of the story is dramatic and coherent.

From Zachary Woolfe, nytimes.com, May 15, 2022

Now at the Metropolitan Opera, Dean and Jocelyn's "Hamlet" is brooding, moving and riveting. These two artists have put a softly steaming small choir in the orchestra pit, and musicians in balcony boxes for fractured fanfares. And, through acoustic means and groaning subwoofers alike, they have put the agonized characters nearly inside your bloodstream.



From left, Sarah Connolly (Gertrude), Rod Gilfry (Claudius), Clayton, William Burden (Polonius) and Rae, with John Relyea on the ground. Credit...Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Comparing his experience at the Met with the 2017 premiere of the opera at Glyndebourne, the critic had this to say:

... {T}he union of Dean's score and Jocelyn's libretto — a spirited yet deadly serious mash-up of the play's different versions — now felt more convincing. The opera seems to have grown into itself. Without losing its patient, ritualistic grimness or its games with theatricality, it has stronger narrative propulsion. What seemed episodic in 2017 now comes across as a taut dramatic arc, the text sometimes stylized — characters tend to stammer repetitions of key lines — but the storytelling clear, lean and always supported by the agile music.

Rick Perdian, in sundayclassicalreview.com, May 15, 2022, tells us something about the composer and librettist.

Born, raised and educated in Australia, Dean played violin in the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra from 1985 to 1999, until deciding to pursue a career as a freelance performer and composer. His music is championed by leading conductors and orchestras worldwide. Jocelyn, the former artistic and general director of Canadian Stage, the largest not-for-profit theatre in Canada, wears many hats, including those of director and librettist.

He continues,

In the Met's production, unveiled Friday night, Shakespeare is well served dramatically. Dean and Jocelyn have crafted a gripping story from the tragic tale, which is given life by an excellent cast. ... [W]hile the drama is streamlined, little essential is missing. The impressive feat is that all of these characters are vividly etched and that coherency is maintained throughout the opera.

Dean's score is a sonic experience. Electronics, as well as an exotic battery of unusual instruments include an accordion, sandpaper, a Japanese singing bowl played by swirling marble inside, and a tam-tam rubbed by a rubber ball with the pitch electronically lowered a few octaves. Dean describes the latter, as being "the creepiest sound imaginable."

However

The great lines of the play were practically inaudible at this performance in an opening scene that left one exhausted and overwhelmed.

As to Conductor Nicholas Carter and the orchestra

When it comes to color, precision and clarity, the Met orchestra is in its element and delivered here, as did both the on- and off-stage choruses.

And for those who don't expect to be totally enthralled

Clocking in at over three hours, with one intermission, the opera is as unwieldy as most productions of the play. Opera doesn't need to be an endurance test. By the end of the first act, which runs for 105 minutes, the audience was getting restive. Standing near an exit at intermission [sic], a small, but steady stream of people left, not to return.

Finally, a more nuanced appraisal of this immersion in Hamlet's psyche from David Salazar, operawire.com, May 14,2022:

Dean states that his hope is for his music to envelop the audience and toss you inside Hamlet's splintering mind; the chaos of the music certainly manages that but from an observational standpoint. We are made to NOTICE the sound effects or that an accordion player is dominating a scene, or that there are musicians in the audiences, but it doesn't necessarily feel like more than a musical trick.

It feels like this because what you end up missing is the character details and moments that truly elevate. Hamlet's anguish seems to oscillate between extremes of musical chaos (which again makes sense intellectually), but never anything in between, thus, zapping him of his complexity and keeping us at arms' length emotionally.

And I cannot help borrowing the following from the Opera Wire review, a general commentary on the modern style, which expresses my own opinion:

"Hamlet" shouldn't necessarily stick to formulas, mainly because its subject matter is so brilliantly unwieldy. But it's vocal writing feels rather typical of what you might identify with modern opera – an interminable stream of rhythmic recitatives that, without the interpreter's emotional investment, are unable to elicit much emotion on their own. This places the onus on the performances [sic], who are tasked with taking on music that is as hard to sing as it is to listen to; probably even more so. But even then, because of the cold and calculated manner of the writing, you're kept at a distance, unable to fully engage. There's no doubt that musicologists will be the ones to get the most out of what Dean is doing musically. That aside, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two countertenors, get some of the cheekiest music that plays perfectly into their characters.

Some are obviously impressed and engaged by these modern excursions, but I personally find it impossible to be truly moved by them, which means that a major lure of the operatic art is missing. Dean himself said that the experience "is not necessarily a moving one."

Selections from the opera available on youtube.com, search "Brett Dean Hamlet."