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Fringe Festival: *Magnum Opus*

This year's [Capital Fringe Festival](#) features three chamber operas, including Michael Oberhauser's *Magnum Opus*, heard yesterday afternoon. This one-act chamber opera [premiered in February](#), with a slightly different cast, at Catholic University's [Benjamin T. Rome School of Music](#), where Oberhauser and most of the founders and performers of the small company [Opera Alterna](#) cut their teeth as students. The company's artistic director, [Jay D. Brock](#), who directed the staging of this production, and several of the artists spoke about their work last week on WAMU's [Kojo Nnamdi Show](#).

The story is a mash-up of the biography of Robert Schumann and the Faust legend. As the ghost of Schumann reveals, the two sides of his bi-polar musical personality -- the depressive, introspective Eusebius and the outgoing, manic Florestan -- were actually the voices of two muses, Melpomene and Polyhymnia. These muses also offer their Faustian pact to a modern-day Robert, a playwright and composer struggling to make it in Washington: they will inspire him to greatness, but at the risk of his own madness. Robert, who fears that his writer's block will drive his girlfriend, Claire, into the arms of a more successful composer, John, agrees to listen to the muses. He has his success -- an adoring review in the print edition of the Post Style section (which might one day date this opera to a bygone era), but things do not turn out as he planned.



Robert (Tad Czyzewski) being seduced by the Greek Muse Melpomene (Daniele Lorio) in *Magnum Opus*, Opera Alterna, Capital Fringe Festival (photo by Nickie Brock)

The singing was generally just fine, with high points in the upper-register pianissimo of Sarah Philippa's Claire and the warm, burnished tone of Tricia Lepofsky as the kinder of the two muses, Polyhymnia, who as muse of sacred poetry seemed to have more of a conscience. As Melpomene, the muse of song and tragedy who intentionally sabotages Robert's life, as if to create tragedy, Daniele Lorio's soprano was shrill, even piercing, perhaps appropriately. The others -- baritone Eric Sillers (Schumann), tenor Robert Legge (John), and baritone Eric Black (Robert, and only for this performance, replacing Tad Czyzewski) -- sang and acted

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well, if not to great distinction. One of the things that was sorely missed was a diction coach: just because singers speak English does not mean that they will sing it well.

Oberhauser's hour-long score is accomplished, weaving into its opening scene the gorgeous melody of Schumann's song, *In der Fremde*. The first song of Schumann's op. 39 *Liederkreis*, it sets a poem by Eichendorff about alienation and thoughts of death, but the impact of its haunting melody on the opera's story is not entirely understood until later. The compositional style is primarily tonal, although there are a few flirtations with dissonance and modernistic techniques like atonal glissandi. The close harmonic structures of many sections, like Claire's lovely aria ("I wish I could lie"), recall the California jazz post-tonality of composers like David Conte, Frank Ferko, and Eric Whitacre. Another important influence, which enlivens the score considerably, are Latin American rhythms underlying many sections of the piece, reminiscent of Astor Piazzola. Oberhauser squeezes some beautiful colors from his small ensemble of flute, clarinet, violin, viola, cello, and piano, all played competently and with impressive ensemble cohesion.

A young composer's attempt to get a full opera staged by a major company is a quixotic adventure these days, but things have been bad for some time. Even Benjamin Britten, after the triumphant premiere of his opera *Peter Grimes*, was disappointed by the difficulty of getting new operas to the stage. His solution was to form his own small opera company, creating instead a series of chamber operas for a small cast and a modest orchestration of a dozen or so musicians. Those celebrated works, the focus of Lorin Maazel's new Castleton Festival (see my [review](#) in the Washington Post today), are models of dramatic clarity and concision. Opera Alterna [takes the same approach](#), and its guerilla style of staging short operas for reduced forces fits right into the experimental focus of the Fringe Festival.

This performance will be repeated three more times (July 16, 18, and 25, at various times), on the main stage at Warehouse Arts (1021 7th St. NW).

By [Charles Downey](#) in [Arts and Events](#) on July 13, 2009 3:13 PM [0 Comments](#) [0 Likes](#)

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