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CAPITAL FRINGE FESTIVAL

## 'Life in Death' & 'Opus': Operas Taking Fringe Seriously

By [Anne Midgette](#)  
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It's easy to despair about overstuffed opera productions -- the pageantry and pomp of million-dollar theater. And it's easy to forget that there's more to opera than the grand stage. But chamber opera in the greater D.C. area has a number of energetic young proponents (led by American Opera Theater, which has sustained several seasons of thoughtful, offbeat repertory). Whether these companies are producing fantastic work is beside the point; the good thing is that young artists are motivated to put on their own shows and bring a young, unconventional, indie vibe into the world of opera.

Indeed, I'd be happier to see the vibe get more unconventional still. Two operas -- "Life in Death" and "Magnum Opus" -- are among the eclectic offerings at the Capital Fringe Festival (which runs through July 26), and both are, to a greater or lesser degree, constrained by traditional notions of music and high seriousness. It would be nice if "experimental opera" could mean more than simply experimenting with ways to present opera on a smaller scale. For instance: "Life in Death" by Gregg Martin, which opened at the Fringe on Sunday, bills itself as "an Opera Electronica," but this is partly making a virtue of necessity; the computer supplies instrumental sounds that the two live musicians (a violinist and a percussionist) can't provide on their own. Call it "synthesized orchestra," and the critics are up in arms because a machine is replacing living players. But the difference in this case seems more one of semantics than of conception.

Both operas, indeed, explicitly address issues of artistic greatness -- which is difficult territory to negotiate successfully. "Life in Death" is based on the Edgar Allan Poe story "[The Oval Portrait](#)," about a painter who becomes so obsessed with creating a portrait of his beautiful young bride that he fails to notice she is wasting away before his eyes. "Magnum Opus," which opened on July 9, follows in the footsteps of Schumann. The composer is actually a character in this story of a (contemporary) young playwright



"Opus": Sarah Philippa, Tad Czystewski. (Capital Fringe Festival)

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named Robert, who succumbs to the dictates of two mercurial muses; they lead him to greatness and then to death, as, we infer, they did to Schumann before him. The opera, written by [Michael Oberhauser](#), premiered at Catholic University in February and is presented at Fringe by the small group Opera Alterna. "Magnum Opus" further incorporates Schumann by using the composer's Op. 39 "Liederkreis" (a song cycle) as the basis of its agreeably tonal score, alternating ensembles and arias over a six-part instrumental ensemble in time-honored tradition. It's the kind of winking reference to classical music popular with composers who adore the music of the past and aren't quite sure how to reflect that love in music of the present.

The problem with small-scale opera is that those involved have to do a lot of the work on their own. Both "Magnum Opus" and "Life in Death" (which, though not an Opera Alterna production, was directed by the same director, Jay D. Brock, and featured one of the better singers from "Magnum Opus," the Opera Alterna regular [Tad Czyzewski](#)) had librettos written by their composers, and this was, for both, a signal weakness. Oberhauser's tunes might have soared more had the texts been a little less clunky and the dramatic action more credible. As for "Life in Death": There is drama to this story, but Martin had trouble finding it. Despite the introduction of a dancer (Katherine Frattini) to give some life to the wasting figure of the bride (who was admirably sung by [Bridgid Eversole](#)), his telling was static and monochromatic, focused on the dark heaviness of "You are young and innocent-I love you-I'm dying" themes that repeated over and over, emphasized by intense instrumentation.

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The singing was also variable. "Magnum Opus," the more ambitious of the two pieces, had the larger cast, but suffered from the vocal limitations of Sarah Philippa, a founder of the company, in the big role of Claire, a singer married to the struggling playwright Robert (Czyzewski). At the other end of the spectrum, [Daniele Lorio](#), as the muse Melpomene, had the same full-blown sensuality and full-blown voice she showed in the fledgling company's Fringe outing last year, a double bill of Thomas Pasatieri operas. Together with her more

sensible sister Polyhymnia ([Tricia Lepofsky](#)), she goads Robert on to a bad end, spurred by nothing more than capricious boredom. The opera wasn't sure whether it wanted to be high art or a Jules Pfeiffer sketch. But for all its weaknesses, it had enough in it to make one curious about what it -- or the energy it represented -- might be when it grows up.

*Magnum Opus* will be performed again on July 16, 18 and 25 at the Warehouse; *Life in Death* has additional performances on July 17, 18, 19 and 24 at Redrum. Visit <http://www.capfringe.org>.

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