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**MUSIC: MINNESOTA OPERA, 'ANIMALEN'**

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ST. PAUL, Jan. 11 -- The Ordway Music Theater, St. Paul's dramatic attempt to draw the city's physical and artistic elements into one clear and central light, opened to the public this week with presentations by the people who will use it most.

Leontyne Price sang Tuesday night as part of the Schubert Club's traditional concert series. On Wednesday, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra officially took up residence. And last night, the Minnesota Opera publicly explored its new home for the first time with a performance of "Animalen," a piece by the Swedish composer Lars Johan Werle.

The Ordway, which houses two theaters and cost \$45 million, overlooks the Mississippi River on one side and, on another, serves to brighten and complement the more formal public buildings surrounding Rice Park. A major force in the new center has been Sally Ordway Irvine of the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing family, who made a trip downtown a few years ago and, as she says, "lost my temper" at having nothing to do. The Ordway family, since Mrs. Irvine's initial fit of frustration, has contributed \$15 million toward the project, with \$32.5 million more raised from all private sources. The campaign to pay for the rest of Ordway continues.

Its two theaters will give homes to the city's principal musical entities, which have wandered around St. Paul over the years, occupying a succession of less than satisfactory halls. The Ordway, however, is a privately owned, nonprofit corporation and is presenting shows and concerts of its own. One habitual visitor will be the Minnesota Orchestra, housed in Minneapolis across the river.

The Ordway Music Theater was designed by one of St. Paul's own, Benjamin Thompson, and gleams from the outside with brick, stone, copper and glass. Within are an 1,800-seat concert and opera space and a smaller theater for 300.

The contours of the main hall have a grace and sweep along the lines of old European models. The colors and decor are more unsettling, and faintly resemble an elaborate set for "A"ida." The inner shapes seem almost Mozartean in their intentions. Rounded edges dominate, and everywhere there is glowing mahogany, brass and terra-cotta reds. The carpet is a startling blue.

Still, Ordway's most interesting ideas are acoustical. The main hall begins with the traditional materials - wood and plaster - but its acoustician, R. Lawrence Kirkegaard, has installed mechanical ways to reconfigure these elements - much as one would fiddle with the dials of an amplifier at home. To control reverberation and enhance clarity, sound-absorbing panels can descend into the spaces behind the wooden grills around the hall; curtains come into play; overhead panels are moved mechanically into place. Acoustical "clam shells" in the ceiling open and close to reflect sound energy into the balcony.

The chamber orchestra is framed within a movable and adjustable mahogany shell. Most fascinating is a two-story pit elevator - the top level raising to form a thrust stage and the bottom floor serving then as an alternative orchestra pit.

Thursday's "Animalen" provided fragmentary evidence of how well all this works. The instrumental sound was well-defined, and heard from two separate listening places, the voices seemed brightly projected and clearly articulated.

Less clear is why this exceedingly trivial opera was chosen for the Minnesota Opera's Ordway debut in the first place. "Animalen," a fantasy in two acts with a libretto by Tage Danielsson, tells of the animal kingdom's attempts to mediate between two superpowers bent on mutual annihilation. There are little bits of "Ninotchka" here, great bleeding hunks of "The Merry Widow" and a star-crossed, Communist-Capitalist romance that would have embarrassed Hollywoodians of the 1940's. Musically, there are imitation Viennese waltzes, imitation gospel music, imitation Cossack choruses, imitation rock, etc.

The story, given in an English translation, operates on the premise that Americans and Russians are equally silly - and equally worrisome - in their bellicosity toward one another. Its creators seem to feel that their theme is unassailable, and so sit lazily back and repeat familiar slogans. It is a shame given this forum not to say something new and moving about the arms race.

There are no characters - simply stereotypes; and ironically at the end, the reconciliation between two potentially violent powers is imposed by threats of violence from the animals themselves - hardly a satisfactory solution for seekers of peace. This opera, now six years old, has had some 500 performances mostly in Scandinavia and West Germany - a fact which speaks ill of cultural tastes in the north of Europe. One can see the reasons for offering a Swedish opera to St. Paul's pervasively Scandinavian population, but one wonders at the values of the Minnesota Opera in making this kind of choice.

The production was, however, professional. The opera's orchestra under Philip Brunelle played beautifully, and Gail Dobish, Robert McFarland, John Seabury, Sven-Bertil Taube and Karen Leigh sang exceptionally well. Nicholas Solomon and Marilyn Florez made a pale pair of lovers, but no one in this large cast was really bad. Franco Colavecchia's design was simple and effective, even though his projections of mushroom clouds, and the scenic wonders they threaten, did not shine with originality. Grethe Barrett Holby staged and choreographed smoothly, but under- used the evening's one potential comic moment - a set of "Swan Lake" dancers partnered by penguins.

photo of Ordway Music Theater interior

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