

Natoma

NEW YORK CITY

Victor Herbert Renaissance Project | DiMenna Center for Classical Music

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“This is a reading, not a performance,” stressed Alyce Mott, artistic director of the Victor Herbert Renaissance Project, prior to a full run-through of a newly-restored version of Herbert’s ambitious 1911 grand opera *Natoma*. The reading took place the afternoon of July 13 in the Mary Flagler Cary Hall of the DiMenna Center for Classical Music, and it represented the first big public step in rehabilitating this forgotten work. The restoration job has been a true labor of love, stretching out over many years and requiring the combined talents of Mott, musicologists Glen Clugston and Peter Hilliard, and fiscal sponsor Dan Pantano of the Concert Operetta Theatre in Philadelphia.

They are owed a debt of gratitude, as *Natoma* turns out to be a real piece of buried treasure. Herbert’s score is gorgeous and often galvanizing in its dramatic force, and the plot, ham-handed though it may be, sensitively treats its Native American title character. *Natoma* the daughter of a deceased chieftain, lives on one of the Channel Islands off the coast of Santa Barbara in 1820 under the Spanish regime. She is loved by Paul, a U.S. naval officer, but Paul’s attention instantly strays the moment *Natoma*’s dearest childhood friend Barbara, daughter of a Spanish nobleman, returns home after growing up in a convent. A figure of self-sacrifice, *Natoma* steps aside, and even kills a Spanish officer who tries to abduct Barbara. As the opera ends, *Natoma* renounces her own faith and seeks protection from the law within the walls of a cloister.

One would not want to oversell *Natoma* — its libretto by Joseph D. Redding is clunky in the extreme, featuring tissue-thin characters, glacial plotting, and the worst kind of Victrola Book of the Opera “librettoese.” “Thee’s” and “thou’s” abound, as do such moments as the half-breed villain snarling at *Natoma*: “Softly! Softly! I would not make you angry; and yet, methinks, if that young Lieutenant from the big ship asked you to his wigwam, you would not say him nay. Ah, ha! ha! ha!”

Natoma had its premiere in Philadelphia on February 25, 1911, presented by what was then known as The Philadelphia-Chicago Grand Opera company. The first performance boasted a starry cast that included Mary Garden in the title role plus John McCormack, Lillian Grenville, Mario Sammarco, Hector Dufranne, and Armand Crabbé. The same company brought *Natoma* to the stage of the Metropolitan Opera three nights later, though not under the Met’s auspices. Both critical and audience reaction was muted, and *Natoma* quickly slipped away into history.

The audience for this restoration, however, went along quite willingly with Herbert’s lushly melodic score and thrilling orchestration, vividly conducted by Gerald Steichen. This is no operetta — although Herbert provided plenty of local flavor and pageantry in the music, it is a highly dramatic score that at times shows the influence of Liszt and Wagner, and looks ahead to some of the better Hollywood work of Alfred Newman and Franz Waxman. Despite the slow pacing (the leisurely first act clocks in at nearly ninety minutes) there is plenty of dramatic tension in the score, as well as moments of heart-stopping beauty. A large first-act concerted

ensemble, interwoven with an offstage women's chorus, was particularly ravishing. It was especially painful that, due to the orchestra's strict union regulations, Steichen literally had to cut off the finale of the opera with only eight bars left to go, rather than face crippling overtime charges.

A fine cast of young singers, forging their way through the antiquated libretto with complete conviction, allowed us to hear this work with all the respect it was due. Lara Ryan sang the title role with a creamy soprano full of power at both ends of her wide range. The huge orchestra sometimes covered her middle register during the most dramatic moments; one has to wonder how a lyric soprano like Garden could have gotten through this role, which would seem to require a full-scale dramatic soprano. Monica Yunus sang in sparkling, silvery tones as Natoma's romantic rival Barbara, and tenor Tyson Miller brought enormous charm and a ringing tenor to the part of Lieutenant Paul. Gregory Sheppard unfurled a warm, mellow bass as Barbara's father Don Francisco, and Ron Loyd displayed an appropriately granitic, grounded sound as the local priest, Father Peralta. Baritones Matthew Singer and Robert Balonek used pointed tone and clear diction to make the most of the villainous roles of Juan Bautista Alvarado and Jose Castro, while young tenor Colin Anderson had a brief, shining moment singing a catchy, campy milonga in the Act II fiesta scene.

Chances are that we will never see a full-scale mounting of this wonderfully old-fashioned work, but Natoma could easily lend itself to concert stagings, and is definitely overdue for a full recording. People are going to be surprised by just how good much of this music really is. spacer

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