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OPERA REVIEW

New Opera by Meira Warshauer Premieres in Wilmington

By [Barry Salwen](#)

March 18, 2018 - Wilmington, NC:

The [Temple of Israel](#) was perhaps an unexpected locale for the first performance of *Elijah's Violin*, a new chamber opera by the esteemed composer [Meira \(MeEEra\) Warshauer](#). The composer is a Wilmington, NC native but has made her home for many years in Columbia, SC. Her works for orchestra, piano, and chamber ensembles have been widely performed and appear on a number of recordings. As mentioned on her website, she "has devoted much of her creative output to Jewish themes and their universal message."

Temple of Israel's historic building, opened in 1876, is the oldest synagogue in North Carolina. Its new addition, the Reibman (REEBman) Center opened just three years ago, in 2015. The center, including its social hall, is a sizable and lively place, but has not, to this author's knowledge, been used before to mount concerts. However, one could imagine such events occurring there in the future. The natural light gives the room an inviting atmosphere, and for the modest forces involved in this performance, the acoustics served successfully.

The title *Elijah's Violin* comes from a Jewish folk tale which Warshauer, in opening remarks, described encountering years earlier. As a biblical figure, Elijah has a particular presence in the first book of Kings. He is associated there both with events in the Jewish kingdoms and with a number of miracles. So, although there is no biblical book authored by him, he is a fairly important prophet. Today Elijah is invoked by Jews worldwide every year on the Passover, one of the great miracles in Jewish tradition. So why not another miracle? In this story, Elijah and his violin are the agents by which a girl can recover her soul, which has been taken from her by demons.

Warshauer's work – performed here without staging – is a chamber opera, with total performers numbering about twenty. The piece has Warshauer's characteristic expressive melodic quality and is largely tonal. In conflicted moments, the language becomes more dissonant, but as in her other music, whether for instruments or voice, song predominates.

There were five vocal soloists. The young tenor Matthew Talley stood out as the brother Raphael (Rafi), with full voice and expression over the vocal range. Carl Samet played both the mushroom collector in the woods and the prophet Elijah. His rich bass was resonantly expressive. The sister Shulamit (Shula) who loses her soul, was sung attractively by soprano Madison Murphy. Catriona MacLean had a weightier role as Zohara, the helpmate to Rafi in redeeming Shula's soul. She sang her part with a good deal of drama. The same was true for Tanya Wheeler's performance as Zohara's Auntie Malka. Her full voice projected the drama and the character well.

The eight-woman chorus took on a variety of roles in the story with a pleasing and blended tone throughout. The small instrumental ensemble was headed by Stephen Field at the piano. Flutist Mary Gheen played with lovely and varied tone. Jacqueline Taylor Hendricks, cello, was always lush and expressive. Joe Hickman led the instruments and chorus with sensitivity in a good number of required tempo changes. Nancy King directed the singers as part of the UNCW Opera Workshop. Susan Levi Wallach, who wrote the libretto jointly with Warshauer, narrated evocatively in the tone of a children's story. The simple but effective costumes were designed by Mark Sorensen.

The piece had a number of touching musical moments. A cello-flute duet created palpable atmosphere as Rafi slept in the woods and demons lurked in the dark. Elijah sang dee-dee-dii with a joy that embodied the Jewish spirit. Shula sang a lovely, reflective song upon being found again, and the chorus ended the opera

EVENT INFORMATION

Wilmington -- (Sun., Mar. 18, 2018)

[Temple of Israel: *Elijah's Violin*](#)

General Admission \$12; Temple of Israel Students Free -- Reibman Center , (910) 762-0000 -- 4:00 PM

with another song of gentle celebration.

A nice additional touch before the opera was the performance of Warshauer's Bracha (brakhAH, which means blessing), written a number of years earlier. It is a soulful piece, and includes material taken over into the opera as something of a mood-setting leitmotif.

The composer still considers *Elijah's Violin* to be a work in progress. In the future, some or all of the narration may be set for the chorus. However, one could imagine two versions of the piece: the current one, suited for younger audiences, and a full musical realization for an easier-level college production. At 50 minutes and with a small group of performers, the opera can succeed in a variety of settings. Warshauer has told the tale with lyrical and evocative music, and the audience responded with well-deserved appreciation.



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