



■ Boris Grappe as Sganarelle in Geneva's 'Le Médecin malgré lui'

To start with, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande overpowered the voices somewhat—no doubt a matter of getting used to the acoustics of the temporary THÉÂTRE DES NATIONS—but Sébastien Rouland soon found the right balance between the pit and the stage with conducting that was clean and precise rather than emphatic or flashy. The audience had the opportunity to rediscover, or more likely just discover, such forgotten favourites as Léandre's delightful *couplets* 'Qu'ils sont doux vos petits glouglous', the trio 'Êtes-vous médecin?' (which pays sly tribute to the masked trio in *Don Giovanni*) and the chorus of wood-gatherers at the end of Act 1. Boris Grappe was duly lauded for his sparkling Sganarelle and there were also fine performances from Doris Lamprecht (Jacqueline), Stanislas de Barbeyrac (Léandre), Clémence Tilquin (Lucinde), Franck Leguérinel (Géronte) and the rest of the cast.

NICOLAS BLANMONT

## United States

### Cincinnati

Internationally, maybe even nationally, Gregory Spears is the best unknown opera composer in America. (Of course, there may be still better unknowns, but I wouldn't know them.) On the basis of his chamber opera *Paul's Case* (March 2014, p. 336) and now his *Fellow Travelers*, which received its premiere at CINCINNATI OPERA on June 17, Spears ranks right up there with David T. Little, who with *Dog Days* and *JFK* counts as better known than Spears. So far.

There are parallels. Both composers earned PhDs at Princeton, both live in the New York area, both have worked with the ubiquitous librettist Royce Vavrek, both have had their key works presented at Beth Morrison's Prototype Festival. But whereas Little deals passionately in big political, dystopian issues, with often a strong admixture of



■ Aaron Blake as Timothy Laughlin and Joseph Lattanzi as Hawkins Fuller in the premiere of 'Fellow Travelers' at Cincinnati Opera

their melodic shape, blend into the instrumental textures, and the action moves subtly from recitative-like conversation to quasi-arias. There are deeply affecting solo scenes, and a dramatic betrayal confrontation. It is all very beautiful.

*Fellow Travelers* has a libretto by Greg Pierce based on a 2007 novel of the same name by Thomas Mallon. The background is the 'lavender scare' in Washington DC in the 1950s in which the dreaded Senator Joseph McCarthy expanded his career-destroying attacks from lurking Communists to lurking homosexuals, in his eyes morally degenerate and susceptible to blackmail. The plot focuses on two lovers, the older, more sexually predatory Hawkins (Hawk) Fuller, who works at the State Department, and the younger, idealistic, conservative Catholic Timothy Laughlin, who falls desperately in love with Fuller. Eventually the threat of persecution drives the two apart, and the opera ends on a note of mutual despair.

*Fellow Travelers* was performed in the smaller theatre of the ARONOFF CENTER FOR THE ARTS. (Cincinnati's big operas—this season *Die Fledermaus*, *Fidelio* and *Tosca*—are being done two or three times in the 2,500-seat Procter and Gamble Hall.) It was set for 11 performances in the JARSON-KAPLAN THEATER, which holds fewer than 400 and was not full on the opening night; one hopes that will have changed when the reviews rolled in. The first-night audience, full of Cincinnati's finest, gave the opera a heartfelt standing ovation, and one hopes that was not solely out of local pride.

*Fellow Travelers* is not perfect. Sometimes Spears's lulling music begs for more contrast. The 16 scenes might better be performed without a break (which would take about 100 minutes). Especially given the decision to move the last scene of the first part, as indicated in the score and programme synopsis, to become the first scene of the second part, the first part ended abruptly. The sad, moving finale is slightly undercut by a blustering, more 'dramatic' conclusion.

That niggled, this was still a moving opera with a seductively beautiful score, and it was well served here. Kevin Newbury (who had directed *Paul's Case*) made deft use of

rockish electronic noise, Spears writes quieter, more intimate music, and his two major operatic scores have gay themes. He has evolved a distinctive musical voice that blends consonance, (non-Reichian, non-Glassian) minimalism and Baroque and pre-Baroque subtleties with feathery filigree and intimations of Janáček's internal repetitions. The orchestral colours reveal a rare ear for subtle, arresting combinations and sonorities. The music has a flow, somewhere between Cavalli and Wagner, in which the vocal lines, without losing

the lovely theatre, with simple decor—sliding set pieces handled by cast members—from Vita Tzykun (who did Little's *Dog Days*) and nice lighting from Thomas C. Hase. The stage direction hardly slighted the physical intimacy of the main characters, with impassioned kisses and bedroom caresses (both wore boxer shorts and socks, a very 1950s touch). The cast was headed by the strong baritone of Joseph Lattanzi as Fuller and the edgy but affecting tenor of Aaron Blake as Laughlin. Mark Gibson was the sympathetic conductor of the 17-member instrumental ensemble. JOHN ROCKWELL

## Houston

HOUSTON GRAND OPERA is braving Wagner's epic *Ring* cycle at the rate of one opera per year. The third instalment was unveiled on April 16 in the WORTHAM THEATER, and the 61-year-old company's first *Siegfried* proved successful both musically and dramatically. As in *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, the production, by Barcelona's innovative La Fura dels Baus theatre group—the director Carlus Padrissa, set designer Roland Olbeter, costume designer Chu Uroz, lighting designer Peter van Praet and video designer Franc Aleu—was visually stunning even when it was baffling. When something was referred to in the music or libretto—Nothing the sword, birds, fire, water, the earth—it appeared on giant upstage screens via computer-generated imagery. And the physicality of the army of extras was impressive; clad in skin-tight body suits, they writhed and slithered around the stage as lumps of gold and lizardy forest creatures. Extras serving as Mime's robotic helpers mimed synchronized team-hammering while Siegfried forged, and Brünnhilde's rock was surrounded by seated extras holding flaming torches.

HGO's artistic and musical director Patrick Summers conjured up both volume (the Forging Scene) and shimmering delicacy (the Forest Murmurs), traced lyrical passages fluidly, and brought incisive bounce to the jaunty rhythms associated with Siegfried. Jay Hunter Morris lacked clarion ring and there were a few pitch problems, but his warm, firm tenor had the power and stamina for the punishing title role and his characterization winningly went from youthful swagger to charming bashfulness when meeting his first-ever woman. Christine Goerke's sometimes gusty soprano failed to get all the way up to the soaring high notes in the final duet, but she sang with some delicacy as well as strength and her defrocked Valkyrie was touchingly vulnerable.

Iain Paterson's bass-baritone was weak at the bottom but handsomely resonant elsewhere, and he made a stately, authoritative Wanderer. As Mime and Alberich, Rodell Rosel and

■ Jay Hunter Morris in the title role of 'Siegfried' in Houston

