

Hoiby's "A Month in the Country" Resuscitated

By Shirley Fleming

MusicalAmerica.com

December 10, 2004

NEW YORK – Time marches on, and with it, occasionally, something good emerges. It happened Dec. 8 at the Manhattan School of Music with a persuasive production of Lee Hoiby's "A Month in the Country," an opera that deserves better than its checkered performance history would indicate.

Based on Ivan Turgenev's 1850 play, with a libretto by the late stage director William Ball, the two-act work was premiered at New York City Opera in 1964, where it had some success; it went on to Washington D.C. in 1965 but then sank into oblivion until a Boston production 17 years later, at which point Hoiby changed the title from "Natalia Petrovna" to Turgenev's original one.

It is easy to view the opera as out of step with the times, or at least with the times in which it first appeared. It is unfashionably melodious, warmly emotional, harmonically conservative, direct in its reflection of the characters' dilemmas. It doesn't hesitate to gush a bit, but it also has some nicely restrained and subtle episodes. And it does not, like so many modern stage works, put the burden of interest in the pit. The orchestra is colorful, mood-setting, and supportive, but the voices are the focal point, and they tell the tale clearly.

The play is both poignant and funny. The assortment of people at cross purposes under one roof includes the young matron Natalia Petrovna, bored to tears and more or less in love with the poet Rakitin, who returns her affections; the handsome young tutor Belaev, who unwittingly arouses Natalia's real passion; the charmingly cynical Dr. Shpigelsky, in pursuit of a profitable marriage with the family's ditsy ward. Add to these Natalia's husband, her mother-in-law, and her niece Vera, and the domestic pot boils furiously. At the final curtain, a few have found happiness, some have fled the scene, some are left as they began.

Hoiby sets all this with skillful pacing, a general sense of momentum, expressive arias, and well-knit ensembles. The bouncy self-righteousness of the Doctor, supported by bubbling humor in the orchestra, creates a plum role for any tenor; a duet for Vera and the tutor is genuinely tender; a big solo scene for Natalia, in despair at the end of Act I, pulls out all the stops, and her Act II opening becomes a kind of incipient mad scene, underlined by a pungent orchestra. The opera's final episode, an ensemble about loneliness, is impressively somber.

Manhattan's young cast brought energy and confidence to the first of three performances. JennyRebecca [sic] Winans was well in control of the quite demanding role of Natalia, and convincing in the intensity of her emotional stress. Yoosun Park's appealing soprano was just right for the innocent and hopeful young Vera, and Vivian Krich-Brinton flitted brightly through the coloratura of the daffy ward, Lisaveta. Jon-Michael Ball ran away with the role of Dr. Shpigelsky; Liam Bonner's pleasant baritone nicely defined the modest and well-meaning character of the tutor, Belaev. As the poet Rakitin, Charles Temkey was dramatically a bit stiff, but his sturdy bass filled the part nonetheless. Conductor Steven Osgood and the School's

orchestra did handsomely by the score, and Hoiby's instrumental colors got their due. The composer had a right to look pleased when he appeared on stage for a bow.

Michael Schweikardt's set was delightfully apt – a cozily furnished mid-19th century country living room with a curving staircase to an upper door and a glassed-in view of trees beyond the house.

Copyright 2004, Musical America