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# LIMELIGHT

## Music, Arts & Culture

Review

### Review: Notes from Underground (Sydney Chamber Opera)

by [Clive Paget](#) on 14 August, 2016

★ ★ ★★☆☆ Jack Symonds' smart score renders Dostoyevsky intelligible for the 21st century.

**Carriageworks, Sydney**  
**August 13, 2016**

Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1864 novella, *Notes from Underground*, was the author's breakthrough work and very much ahead of its time. With its original literary architecture and cerebral leaps of focus, it is widely regarded as one of the first and most influential of existential stories. An enigmatic first part reveals a man who has withdrawn from the world – a retired minor civil servant and the Underground Man of the title – addressing an undefined audience of 'gentlemen' in a wide-ranging diatribe on societal ills, human nature, Western philosophy and the impossibility of building a utopian 'Palace of Crystal'. The second part occurs 20 years earlier and is narrated by (supposedly) the same man – commonly known as the Aboveground Man – in which he explains a series of incidents that provoked his subsequent 'burial' from the world and his transition into the Underground man.



**Brenton Spiteri as Aboveground and Simon Lobelson**

In Pierce Wilcox's adaptation, the two halves are performed simultaneously, a choice that instead of leading to confusion in fact brilliantly illuminates the texts as told by each of the men. The resulting single tale is multifaceted – we see events unfold for Aboveground Man, but are simultaneously aware of their ultimate effects on the state of mind of Underground man – possessing a clarity that the original novel seems wilfully to avoid. That, of course, is both a plus and a minus. Dostoyevsky is deliberate in his desire to obfuscate in the first part, his narrator classically unreliable and prone to constant contradictions of the points he makes. Dostoyevsky's text is composite and packed with the philosophical and political discourse of his day, almost teasing us to disbelieve the entire story at several points. Wilcox text is more straightforward, but is perhaps more of a narrative for a 21st-century listener.

What Wilcox has achieved is considerable. His fillet of the two halves is efficient and comprehensible. With only three significant voices, however, set to music it feels overlong – an editor could easily have excised a quarter of the libretto – and one sometimes feels key themes are reiterated just once too often. On the positive side, it's also eminently singable, a fact that composer Jack Symonds has relished to the full in producing a smart, sophisticated composite score blending the lyrical with the rhythmically and harmonically astringent. In fact, it's the constant ear-tickling orchestrations and Symonds' intriguing musical 'games' that keep the attention from wandering when the textual pace flags.

Director Patrick Nolan's 1980's Russian update for Sydney Chamber Opera is equally impressive. Aboveground Man's story is played out on a bare, white platform, reflecting his sterile, civil servant existence. The orchestra plays behind a white veil, their contemporary costumes acting as if we (and he) are almost, but never quite able to get a grip on the real world. Underground Man occupies the lower foreground, a glass of scotch always within reach of his wretched armchair, squatting in a tiny sitting room packed with the tell-tale detritus of a psychological hoarder. Genevieve Blanchett's striking design is simple, spare and effective, allowing Nolan to create memorable pictures, from a convincing taxi ride across St. Petersburg (effective video design by Boris Bagattini) to a lap dance club where a louche attendant rotates a glitterball by hand (enhancing Nicholas Rayment's excellent lighting design).



Brenton Spiteri and Simon Lobelson cope admirably with the demands of the music and drama. It's a long, difficult sing, and neither puts a musical foot wrong all evening. Spiteri's Aboveground is classic spineless non-entity. A mean-spirited bully who has been bullied himself, he charts well the course from flailing optimist to bitter nihilism and his bright tenor is perfect for the occasionally whining clerk. The vestiges of a romantic optimist still cling to him – indeed, he might have exhibited more redeeming features early on – but as the hopeless outsider, Spiteri is excellent at exploring an isolated man on the verge of hysteria. Lobelson is a saturnine presence; brooding and gloomy with a false bravura that masks an abject awareness of failure. He perhaps could have tapped further the absurdist elements of Dostoyevsky's original – he's closer to Crime and Punishment's Raskolnikov than Akaky in Gogol's The Overcoat – but it's a strong performance, potently sung, and Lobelson isn't afraid to go out on an emotional limb

Jane Sheldon as Liza, the prostitute who Aboveground alternately wishes to redeem and destroy, is dramatically highly convincing, capturing the tragedy of a sex-worker who thinks a new capitalist Russia might offer escape from an abusive profession. Vocally she's less satisfactory. Usually a fine singer of contemporary repertoire, problems with diction here mean her text is frequently only intelligible via the surtitles, which otherwise would have been unnecessary. Her laser-beam voice seldom warms the character with vibrato, and a tendency to hit just below the note becomes a frustration. A group of actors create the handful of other characters in the libretto. Their performances are well pointed up, though the spoken text over music is sometimes hard to hear.

*Notes from Underground* was first performed by SCO in 2011 in a production I didn't see. Symonds has recomposed the music since then, and I have to say as new operatic scores go it's a considerable achievement. From the subtle manipulation of vocal synchronicities and discords to the imaginative use of his 11-piece orchestra, Symonds has created a dazzling score that tricks and torments our minds with a parade of half-remembered forms and melodic fragments. Like Berg's *Wozzeck*, he invests his individual scenes with conventional musical forms, to be perceived by the technically adept, but you don't need to understand sonata form or know what a rondo is to follow Symonds' trains of thought.

Dostoyevsky's text has a fair sprinkling of sardonic wit – in 1860 he was very much the heir to Gogol – a fact that Wilcox's libretto largely avoids. A pity, as a little more light might do the shade some added favours. But such criticisms are niggardly in light of the craft and dramatic firepower on display here. For an evening of thoughtful, compelling music drama, powerfully staged and finely sung, *Notes from Underground* is another feather in the company's cap and deserves to be taken up at an international level.

*Notes from Underground* is at Carriageworks until August 20.



Jane Sheldon as Liza, Simon Lobelson as Underground and James Wannan (viola d'amore)

She's a literary icon but few know Henry Handel Richardson studied music in Leipzig and left a legacy of songs.



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