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## Living beneath life

### Keith Gallasch: Sydney Chamber Opera, Notes from Underground



Jane Sheldon, James Wannan, Brenton Spiteri, Sydney Chamber Opera, Notes from Underground, 2016  
photo Zan Wimberley

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Reading Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is hell. Sydney Chamber Opera's adaptation tempers the agony with musical and theatrical beauty, easier to take than a lone reader's dark imaginings, but still painful and, in its final image, more nightmarish than the novel.

Librettist Pierce Wilcox's layering of the second part of the short novel—a series of incidents which the 24-year-old Aboveground Man precipitates—over the first, in which his 40-year-old self, Underground Man, monologues, makes lucid sense of the ramblings of the embittered, retired public servant. Everything in the opera—score, direction, design—services this dynamic. The stage is a wide, white platform, backed by a soft, semi-transparent curtain-cum-screen of equivalent width and colour; together they provide a canvas for transformative hues from dreamy pastels to nightmarish primaries. This is the world of the Aboveground Man. Below and forward of the stage is the lounge chair of Underground Man, from which he addresses us directly, as an imagined audience of his hated peers. Aboveground Man is a tenor (Brenton Spiteri), his older self a baritone (Simon Lobelson), each with his own musical language.

Aboveground Man lives out the past, neurotically strategising and ineffectually avenging himself for an imagined slight by a police officer (a crazy musical march culminating in a mere nudge); forcing himself on former school mates whom he detests but feels a desperate need to impress, with embarrassing consequences; and, drunk and humiliated, sleeping with a

prostitute, Liza. The sallow, alcohol-consuming Underground Man observes, comments and philosophises, caustic, righteous but rattled by what plays out before him.



Jane Sheldon, Simon  
Lobelson, Sydney Chamber  
Opera, Notes from  
Underground, 2016  
photo Zan Wimberley

The opera's binarism is transcended as worlds merge. Underground Man cannot help but enter Aboveground Man's terrain, to observe his younger self close-up, to mock, to warn, to predict, to regret. There are moments when the two voices eerily become one, early on with the desperate "I am" motif they share with the opera's other principal character, Liza, and at its end in an anguished battling of selves. Liza is the novel's and the opera's reality check. Underground Man finds solace for his self-hatred, inertia and paranoia in anti-Enlightenment posturing, priding himself on his cruelty to others and applauding human irrationality. Aboveground Man, failing to feel empathy or love, decries German Romanticism, but finds himself helplessly acting out compassion for the prostitute, warning her, in near sadistic detail, of an early death, advising she marry and offering her his address. His lyrical account of how he would treat a daughter reveals the fantasist in full flight. Despite her flatly spoken objection, "You sound just like a book," (the opera's only unsung words) Liza takes up his invitation.

Spiteri and Lobelson bring home with force the bewilderment recalled and newly felt when she arrives, full of hope, expressing her desire to live, asserting "I am," at Aboveground Man's apartment, spinning him into tantrum, attraction, physical aggression and then rejection while Underground Man declares "only do evil." Aboveground Man forces money on Liza and she leaves. In one of the opera's most exquisitely painful passages, he rationalises furiously that he has purified her with the knowledge of her condition. Finding she's left behind the money, Aboveground Man falls into doubt and regret and Underground Man admits having lived "under life". Both men collapse into protracted annihilation in which the "I am" of one is asserted against the other's and the notion of "we" rejected in a physical struggle in the Underground, music fading, words stuttering and breaking up. Darkness.

Brenton Spiteri, Sydney  
Chamber Opera, Notes from  
Underground, 2016  
photo Zan Wimberley



It's a far more emphatic ending than Dostoevsky's which is open-ended and still resolutely anti-idealist, his character's failure "to live" an illustration of a pervasive social and intellectual malaise. That character in the novel even posits that, given his experiences, "perhaps I turn out to be more alive than you, [the reader]." The opera's hyperbolic obliteration of the character (and the concomitant elimination of the novelist's voice) suggests the out and out failure of the kind of thinking that drives *Notes from Underground*, rendering it just nihilist thinking. It feels like a moral conclusion apt for our own times, that a failure of empathy will, in the end, destroy us. This is amplified by the powerful onstage embodiment of Dostoevsky's "anti-hero" (his term) in palpable conflict with himself. Aboveground Man's pain, frustration, anger and near psychosis render him a complex figure whose self-destruction engenders pathos as we and *Underground Man* witness the appalling inevitability of his unravelling.

Jack Symonds' score captures Dostoevsky's voice. A writer has described the book's style as progressing "in his ejaculatory, stop-and-start way." The composition is aptly turbulent, frequently aggressive (Claire Edwardes' percussion is pivotal), heavily punctuated (intensely dramatising the sung dialogue) and full of comment—a wah-wahing trumpet and a hee-hawing trombone are self-deprecatingly and defensively deployed (*Underground Man*: "I am not funny!"). Vibes 'dance' playfully to a nasty recollection. Strings whine with complaint. The two male characters fall in and out of sync, apart in their discrete worlds or sitting side by side, lingering simultaneously on long anxious notes or mutually and pathetically revelling in "ecstasy" after vengefully nudging the offending policeman.

Spiteri—youthful and nervously vigorous—and Lobelson—sombre, slow-moving, threatening—sing the demanding score with passion and conviction, deftly realising their characters' wild mood swings. Jane Sheldon seems an earthier Liza than Dostoevsky's idealistic innocent, in part because librettist and composer have interpolated an episode from a poem mentioned by the novelist which does not appear in the book. Aboveground Man now first encounters a vampish Liza singing of love, accompanied by an exotic viola d'amore player (James Wannan). Although deliciously sung and staged, the song pre-empts subsequent episodes and has Liza giving voice to unlikely sentiments ("for you I am a symbol") and images (of herself as "a vision wrapped in skin"), while some lines suggest a previous encounter. The episode, however effective in itself, is essentially a literary conceit that

muddies the progression of the opera’s narrative, otherwise so judiciously realised. Perhaps it was incorporated to suggest a more complex, contemporary and knowing Liza or simply to underline Dostoevsky’s anti-romanticism, which is already evident.

This one reservation aside, Notes from Underground is a deeply compelling, finely composed, written, directed, designed and performed work which effectively draws us into a frightening world where absolutes throttle nuance, an all too familiar feeling in our own. It profoundly tests our own capacity for empathy as we witness its failure in a man, withdrawn to his underground, living “under life,” as we might too be tempted.



Sydney Chamber Opera,  
Notes from Underground,  
2016  
photo Zan Wimberley

Sydney Chamber Opera & Carriageworks, Notes from Underground, composer Jack Symonds, librettist Pierce Wilcox, conductor Jack Symonds, director Patrick Nolan, performers Simon Lobelson, Brenton Spiteri, Jane Sheldon, design Genevieve Blanchett, lighting Nicholas Rayment; Carriageworks, Sydney, 13, 15, 17, 19 Aug

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