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Sydney Chamber Opera turn everyman into something special

Notes From Underground

★★★★☆

Sydney Chamber Opera,
Carriageworks, August 13.
Until August 20

Reviewed by Peter McCallum

Dostoyevsky's novella *Notes from Underground* is an essay in self-loathing and perverse self-wounding. When he wrote it in 1864 he wanted (in Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky's translation) to "bring before the public, a bit more conspicuously than usual, one of the characters of a time recently passed".

In composer Jack Symonds' and librettist Pierce Wilcox's opera, it is as though Dostoyevsky's mid-19th century misanthrope – a retired civil servant drawn to self-humiliation and peevish reprisals – has been sifted through Kafka, Eliot and the language of 20th century musical modernism to become a contemporary everyman.

Dostoyevsky's first-person narrative keeps contradicting and undermining itself (not unlike Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*).

Wilcox's well-crafted and terse libretto brings together the two halves – a rambling monologue and a reminiscence of his former life – into a single arch, while Symonds

finds an effective musical parallel, separating the music's "underground" narrator and his "above-ground" younger self.

The two start in unison (brilliantly pitched out of nothing by Brenton Spiteri and Simon Lobelson), only to fracture and diverge.

Spiteri sings the aboveground man with keen edge and focus, creating a nervous obsessive musical persona. Lobelson is more shambling as the "underground man", with a low tessitura loosened by vodka and lassitude.

The third singer, Jane Sheldon, as the potentially redemptive prostitute Liza who is spitefully thrown aside in a rejection of optimistic romantic tropes, sings with purity and a sound of colour and enveloping warmth.

Symonds' music draws on a wide range of styles to create fluid textural metamorphosis, from spiky dissonant pointillism to expansive tonal smoothness in the love scene (if it can be called love).

Above all, it is a score that is highly responsive to dramatic pace, drawing out crucial moments at times, while elsewhere energising the forward movement of the action.

The ensemble, conducted by Symonds and seated behind a gauze curtain at the back (somewhat at the expense of resonance) plays incisively and supportively, with a rhapsodic *Viola d'amore* solo from James Wannan.

Patrick Nolan's direction and Genevieve Blanchett's design gives physical embodiment to the psychological metaphor of above-ground and underground, filling a wide stage area with projected video (Boris Bagattini), choreography (Cloe Fournier) and below-ground junk.

Fans of Sydney Chamber Opera will remember this as the first work with which they sprang onto the artistic scene on a hot night in the Cell-Block theatre.

Although that venue aptly captured Dostoyevsky's dank squalor, this is a most welcome opportunity to renew engagement with a striking, thoughtful and impressive new operatic voice.

THEATRE