

# OPERA NEWS

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## *The Handmaid's Tale*

**BOSTON**  
**Boston Lyric Opera**  
**5/5/19**



Michelle Trainor (Ofglen) and Jennifer Johnson Cano (Offred) in BLO's *Handmaid's Tale*  
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**B**OSTON LYRIC OPERA'S new production of Poul Ruders's *Handmaid's Tale* is a stunning piece of music theater. Strong conducting from David Angus, effective direction by Anne Bogart and a cast anchored by Jennifer Johnson Cano's exceptional protagonist combined for an intense performance at the May 5 premiere.

Adapted from Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of the same name, *The Handmaid's Tale* had its world premiere in Copenhagen in 2000. The work is set in a nightmarish future. The United States has been taken over by a totalitarian religious group after a natural disaster has left much of humanity sterile. Traditional gender roles are strictly enforced. Fertile women who have transgressed the state are forced to serve as "handmaids" and bear children for the infertile elite.

The opera focuses on one of these handmaids, Offred. Scenes from her current life as a handmaid mix with her memories of her idyllic prior life as a wife and mother, as well as the traumatic event that separated her from her family. Even though the opera takes place in an unfamiliar world characterized by bizarre rituals and lingo, *The Handmaid's Tale* was presented with impressive clarity by Bogart, abetted by movement director Shura Baryshnikov. Harvard University's Lavietes Pavilion, the production's unusual venue, is a typical sports gymnasium, and, interestingly, it is a setting in Atwood's novel. The space was effectively transformed with lighting and video effects.

Paul Bentley's tight libretto and Ruders's score—flawlessly conducted and paced by Angus—are exemplary. Ruders's music is not subtle, but it is intelligent and dramatic. The musical language seems right for a world established as a horrifying dark reflection of our own. Terrifying, cacophonous climaxes abound. The characters are allowed moments of tenderness and reflection, but there is no tonal relief here, as if the characters' emotional lives had been corrupted and stunted. Musically, the only weak spot was the penultimate number, a quartet that seemed out of place.

The chief element of the evening's success was Cano's magnificent Offred, who is the heart of the opera: the audience experiences Atwood's dystopia through the eyes of Offred, a lucid witness who, despite her suffering, manages to retain a measure of innocence and hope. Cano, who was onstage constantly, acquitted herself brilliantly in the character's technically challenging music. The mezzo created a vital, compelling figure out of what is essentially a passive role, and she succeeded in drawing the audience completely into Offred's emotional state.

As Aunt Lydia, the domineering matron in charge of training handmaids, soprano Caroline Worra was a standout in the strong ensemble, her dramatic timbre giving vivid presence to a character who sounded like a musical hybrid of the Queen of the Night and John Adams's Madame Mao. Soprano Kathryn Skemp Moran, as Ofwarren, an ill-fated handmaid; soprano Chelsea Basler, as the determined Moira; and soprano Michelle Trainor, as the conspiratorial Ofglen, were fine counterparts to Cano's Offred. David Cushing's sonorous but chilly baritone was appropriate for the Commander, the enigmatic man Offred serves. As the Commander's wife, mezzo Maria Zifchak was a model of imperious, brittle authority. Jesse Darden's easy tenor lent charm to Luke, Offred's husband in her previous life. Felicia Gavilanes was sensitive and impassioned as Offred's past self, although her manner and mien did not match Cano's. Matthew DiBattista was suitably brash and arrogant in the small role of the Doctor, and Vera Savage's soprano was cold and gleaming as New Ofglen.

*The Handmaid's Tale* has a renewed sense of relevance, its profile raised by the popular television series, which extends the characters' storylines beyond the plot of the novel. Bogart's production for Boston Lyric Opera, which beautifully dramatizes Atwood's story and its exploration of what it means to be human in a totalitarian state, is a fine addition to the *Handmaid* conversation. —Angelo Mao