Two new operas premiere in one week — in Hunter

opera opera

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Newcastle was the nation's operatic world premiere capital for a heady week early in October, when two quite different new works made their debuts on consecutive Thursdays.

On October 3, in University House, a new one-acter by a composition student shared a triple bill with two specimens of centuries-old opera; on October 10, in Christchurch Anglican Cathedral, the latest manifestation of a work long in progress was unveiled.

It was an intriguingly innovative idea to combine the very old with the brand new when the Newcastle Conservatorium presented its end-of-year triple bill at University House, Auckland Street, early in October, even if in the final analysis it didn't quite come off.

A similar level of ambition coupled with ingenuity was involved in the attempt to press a venerable Anglican cathedral into service as a theatre showcasing the tale of two lovers whose passion is destined to be consigned to oblivion as they live out their lives in the enforced chastity of separate religious institutions.

ABELARD AND HELOISE
(Ross Fiddes)
In English, without surtitles
Shakespeare et al, Newcastle

Abelard ..... Stephen Weller
Heloise ..... Sue Carson
Alberic ..... Charlie Kolmeuer
Drogo ..... Andrew Benson
Maria ..... Anne Rzechowicz
Hirsinde ..... Susan Hart
Canon Fulbert ..... Richard Thomas
Berengar of Poitiers ..... John Radvan
Guido of Castello ..... Paul Tonerio
John of Salisbury ..... Jason King
Geoffrey of Auxerre ... Rowan James
Market Seller #1 ... Samantha Fiddes
Market Seller #2 ..... Alison Ford
Market Seller #3 ... Michelle Burnin
Market Seller #4 ..... Alison Cox
Market Seller #5 ..... Mark Spencer
Market Seller #6 ..... Roger Onslow
Jongleur #1 ..... Daniel Wilson
Jongleur #2 ..... John Radvan
Three Jolly Monks:
Mark Spencer, Roger Onslow, Bruce Penfold
Washerwoman ..... Michelle Burnin
Guards:
Richard Kearney, Greg Kerr
Alberic's Henchmen:
Michael O'Sullivan, Richard Kearney
Greg Kerr
Townsfolk:
Julie Widjers, Alison Ford, Mark Wilson, Malcolm Lee
Conductor ..... Ross Fiddes
Director ..... Christiane O'Sullivan
Designer ..... Melissa Hankinson
Lighting designer ..... Dean Winter
Christchurch Cathedral, Newcastle
Thursday, October10

ONE COULD scarcely imagine a more apt venue for the presentation of a stage work entitled *Abelard and Heloise* than Christchurch Cathedral, Newcastle.

Perched atop a hill overlooking the city and the sea, this imposing Anglican structure rivals many a Roman Catholic edifice for its towering, vaulted ceiling and its predictably soupy acoustic, however, which makes comprehensible word projection beyond the first few rows of any audience a veritable impossibility.

Newcastle composer Ross Fiddes' *Abelard and Heloise*, with book and lyrics by Paul Kavanagh, has been a stage work in the making since 1997, when it was workshopped and performed in concert form. It was again performed, under a different title, in 1998, in the venerable, conventional Civic Theatre before its latest venture into the ecclesiastical precinct where I first encountered it at its 2002 premiere on Thursday, October 10.

According to a note in the current program, this is the premiere staging of a version of a work which has evolved during this gestation period away from the operatic toward the music theatre end of the spectrum. Whereas the earlier stagings used mostly opera singers in the leading roles, this year's title characters, and most of the other main

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players, were cast from the world of the more popular end of the spectrum of musical theatre.

The current flavor of *Abelard and Heloise*, now described as a musical drama, is extraordinarily varied, ranging from operatic to near-raucous — disparate elements reflecting, appropriately it might be argued, the fate of the two lovers whose torridly sensuous love affair ended abruptly when Abelard was attacked in the depths of the night and castrated by henchmen of Heloise's uncle and protector, one Canon Fulbert. Both the passion and the castration feature in brief scenes in the Fiddes work, but they hardly typify the flavor overall, which is otherwise a fairly even mix of bawdy low-life comedy and gentle romanticism.

I found Fiddes' music most impressive when at its gentlest, and not only I think because I am basically an opera person. His bawdier numbers have the requisite incessant beat and raucous flavor of the music hall but fail to provide sufficiently varied listening to go on pleasing as a rather long evening on very hard pews (start 8 pm, end just before 11 with a single interval) wears on.

But some of his lyrical outpourings both for orchestra and voice work extremely well — naturally enough, predictably, the

newcastle

lyrical passages for the lovers are very effective — and were splendidly performed on this occasion by Stephen Weller (Abelard) and Sue Carson (Heloise) with excellent backing from the orchestra of 25 under the baton of the composer.

This instrumental ensemble was situated in an alcove beside the stage, a natural if makeshift pit which made them invisible to much of the audience, but given the over-resonant cathedral acoustic compromised audibility not at all; what was compromised was comprehensibility.

There was plenty of action and some effective comic moments — particularly from the trio of jocular monks played by Mark Spencer, Roger Onslow and Bruce Penfold. As Abelard's somewhat duplicitous servant Drogo, Andrew Benson made much of some useful chances to strut his stuff, and Anne Rzechowicz made a positive mark as his very pregnant girlfriend Maria. As Canon Fulbert, Richard Thomas was convincingly stern and judgmental.

Christiane O'Sullivan's direction was clean and efficient, with scenes seamlessly flowing on without interruption. Effective use was made of the natural gloom on the periphery of the performing area to implement entrances and exits with efficiency, and only minimal physical props were used — in particular, a simple table adorned only with an ornate cruficix for Heloise in her nun's cell. Dean Winter's lighting was helpful and efficient.

At the helm of his own creation, Ross Fiddes was an efficient conductor, and ensemble was consistently taut on both instrumental and chorus levels. Fiddes' *Abelard and Heloise* still needs polishing if it is to achieve ongoing life, but its latest version afforded almost enough rewards to induce one to forget for the nonce the spartan creature comforts of its venue.

— *DAVID GYGER*

opera in review