



# OperaNow

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**City focus: PHILADELPHIA**

**The Picture of Dorian Gray** *Liebermann*  
**CENTER CITY OPERA THEATER**

Lowell Liebermann's first opera, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was praised for its theatrical and musical excellence, but it had only two performances: one in Monaco in 1996 and one in Minneapolis three years later.

And then Philadelphia's Center City Opera Theater, now in its eighth season, commissioned Liebermann to recast the work for chamber orchestra. That has made all the difference. The pared-down instrumental forces and intimate venue (the 563-seat Perelman Theater) worked together to capture the essence of Oscar Wilde's gripping story of hedonism and aestheticism in Victorian England.

Liebermann's instrumental palate typically embraces many styles, from late-Romantic yearnings to trance-inducing minimalistic passages and ominous rumbles and percussive effects. All this was present in the chamber orchestra version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The difference was that now the orchestra underlined, instead of overwhelmed, the singers. Occasionally words and phrases were lost, but this could be corrected by a better balance of voices and instruments. The libretto certainly deserves to be heard clearly – this too is Liebermann's work and it is highly effective.

The founder and general and artistic director of Center City Opera Theater, Andrew Kurtz, led his ensemble with energy and dramatic flair. Stage director Leland Kimball wisely chose not to clutter the stage, using projections of photos and paintings as backdrops and simple props, so that the characters were always the focus.

The cast was well chosen, with Jorge Garza as Dorian, his intense lyric tenor and dapper, compact appearance suiting the character well. Matthew Curran was the sympathetic and understandably confused Painter, and baritone Raymond Ayers a subtle but insinuating presence as Lord Henry. Jody Sheinbaum sang sweetly as Sibyl Vane, Dorian's momentary lover.

The first act could do with a bit of pruning. The second moved speedily, with the help of such macabre scenes as a dockside tavern where a whore well past her prime gave a shrill rendition of the period ballad "Silver Threads among the Gold" in a key so high as to send shivers down the spine.

--Diana Burgwyn