

KAMINSKY: *As One*

 Cooke; Markgraf; Fry Street Quartet, Osgood. Bright Shiny Things BSTC-0127



Tale of two Hannahs: Cooke and Markgraf
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THE MOST-PRODUCED OPERA in North America is this modest two-hander with string-quartet accompaniment about the trials and tribulations of coming to terms with being transgender. Composed by Laura Kaminsky with a libretto by Mark Campbell and Kimberly Reed, *As One* was developed by American Opera Projects and, since its 2014 premiere, has notched up thirty productions in twenty states across the U.S. Listening to its CD release, it's easy to see why. Kaminsky writes in an approachable style with elements of minimalism and an openhearted lyricism that's smart and never schmaltzy. Echoes of Janáček, Copland and even Vaughan Williams add melodic appeal, while the vocal lines are skillfully crafted and gratefully set. The string quartet is interestingly used, the viola often playing apart from its three colleagues, its line swimming against the general flow as the opera's protagonist swims against societal attempts to straitjacket her into the binary box labeled "male."

Campbell is no opera slouch; his credits include Kevin Puts's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Silent Night* and Mason Bates's Grammy Award-winning *(R)evolution of Steve Jobs*. Along with Reed, he has created a libretto that is taut, sharp and laced with downbeat humor. That, along with the very human central character, offers Kaminsky plenty of scope for lyrical reflection. Structured in fifteen scenes, the work feels more like a song cycle than a conventional opera. That it hangs together so well as drama is a credit to all.

Partly inspired by Reed's own experiences as a transgender woman, *As One* tells the story of Hannah, cleverly portrayed by both a baritone (Hannah before) and a mezzo-soprano (Hannah after). Part One explores her first experiences of gender confusion as a boy in high school. In Part Two, she moves to the West Coast to study, chooses to transition and struggles to cope before suffering a transphobic assault. Part Three finds Hannah in Norway, where she learns that what she feared would always be two halves can come together "as one."

Singers Kelly Markgraf and Sasha Cooke created the roles in 2014 and here sing with experience and authority. Each is especially strong on text, which comes across crystal clear. Markgraf's dark, hefty baritone can feel unrelenting—he is unconvincing as the twelve-year-old Hannah before—but he comes into his own when confronting the dark side of transphobia in the angsty sections of Part Two. Cooke's full, firm mezzo suits the adolescent Hannah somewhat better while rising to the refulgent challenge of the final Norway section.

The Fry Street Quartet, expertly conducted by Steven Osgood, plays flawlessly. The instrumentalists even pitch in with spoken lines and a carol or two in the achingly effective "A Christmas Story," a sequence in which words—and especially music—capture the recognizable pain of being away from home at Christmas, especially if that absence is in part to conceal a difficult secret. Elsewhere they excel at the weird glissandos that accompany the internal workings of Hannah's meds while delivering plenty of euphoria in the chugging rhythms that attend the story's brighter moments.

Well recorded, with its approachable score and winning protagonist, *As One* is a striking and deceptively simple look at identity, honesty and the human condition. —*Clive Paget*