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Babes in Toyland

NEW YORK CITY

MasterVoices & Orchestra of St. Luke's | Carnegie Hall

4/27/17

VICTOR HERBERT TENDS to be ignored in the twenty-first century, or snobbishly swept under the rug, as if few American composers existed before Gershwin, Copland, and Bernstein. Even Broadway aficionados seem to have forgotten him, although his works form a crucial bridge between operetta and the nascent American art form of musical comedy.

MasterVoices (formerly the Collegiate Chorale) took a big step toward correcting that on April 27 at Carnegie Hall with its semi-staged concert performance of Herbert's 1903 smash hit *Babes in Toyland*. A popular warhorse as late as the 1970s, the musical has been remembered mostly in name only since then. MasterVoices made this a crowd-pleasing event by casting it with Broadway stars, commissioning a freshened-up book by Emmy-winning *Frasier* writer and executive producer Joe Keenan, and backing it with their full chorale and the thirty-one-piece Orchestra of St. Luke's. Conducted and directed by MasterVoices' Artistic Director Ted Sperling, it made for one of those memorable only-in-New York evenings.

Babes in Toyland has been changed many times for many versions, but for this performance, MasterVoices went back to Glen MacDonough's original plot, which contains some surprisingly dark elements. Two orphans, Jane and Alan, are under the sinister guardianship of their villainous Uncle Barnaby, who plots to kill them to gain their inheritance. They survive his attempt to drown them, and they escape through a forest of bears and giant spiders to what they believe is the safety of Toyland—only to become the target of the evil Toymaker, who plans to make them the victims of his latest creation: mechanical dolls outfitted with chomping jaws and giant, fearsome teeth. Throughout the show, Jane and Alan are protected and frequently saved by their friends, such Mother Goose characters as Tom-Tom the Piper's Son, Little Bo-Peep, Contrary Mary, and Jack and Jill. Keenan's effective streamlining not only improved the book scenes, but added a meta-theatrical role for Blair Brown as the narrator, who deftly filled the audience in on historical aspects of the original production during the course of the evening.

Herbert's musical and theatrical genius shone not only in the score's more familiar moments—including the title number, the "March of the Toys," and "I Can't Do the Sum"—but in orchestral set-pieces depicting a storm at sea, a sunrise, and a fight between a bear and a giant spider. (The music for the latter will be familiar to many as the *agitato* heard during the Boogeyman sequence in the fondly-remembered 1934 film version that starred Laurel and Hardy, a TV staple of many Baby-Boomer Christmas mornings.)

Lauren Worsham and Christopher Fitzgerald were adorably funny as the Babes, Jane and Alan. Kelli O'Hara clearly had fun playing Contrary Mary, though her lyrics got lost in her Irish-brogue number "Barney O'Flynn." Jay Armstrong Johnson, recently of New York City Opera's *Candide*, was an appealing Tom-Tom the Piper's Son, displaying not only his rangy, focused tenor but some astonishingly clean and precise ballet moves as well. Jonathan Freeman made a delightful meal of the black-hearted Uncle Barnaby, using tones that put one in mind of Cyril Ritchard as Captain Hook. Bill Irwin gave an ingeniously physicalized performance as the Toymaker, but his voice and characterization did not carry into the wide open spaces of Carnegie Hall as well as his stylized body movements. Michael Kostroff was an amusing Chief Inspector Marmaduke, and Chris Sullivan and Jeffrey Schecter made a very funny pair of bumbling thugs.

Now that MasterVoices has done so well by Herbert with *Babes in Toyland*, might it not be worth their while to reintroduce New York to his highly dramatic, ravishingly beautiful opera *Natoma*? It's been lying neglected far too long—about 116 years. —Eric Myers