

EXCEPTIONAL

# SOMTOW GIVES DEATH THE LAST LAUGH

**Siam Opera** takes a dark turn in a powerful production of 'Savitri' by Gustav Holst

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SPECIAL TO THE NATION

Not all would choose the subject of death for a night of entertainment, but Somtow Sucharitkul's Siam Opera has once more gone beyond the ordinary for an evening that delves into, then transcends, darkness to produce enlightenment.

The centrepiece last Monday at the Thailand Cultural Centre was Gustav Holst's rarely heard opera "Savitri". Holst is best known for his colourful "The Planets", and little else, but the score of "Savitri" shows that he had far more to offer, and conductor Nadanai Laohakunakorn made much of the intricacies of this composer's dense music.

"Savitri" tells an ancient Indian story of a wife who outwits Death when he comes to take away her husband Satayavan. Death turns out to be a surprisingly sympathetic character, offering to grant Savitri any wish but the return of her husband. She asks for life, and when the wish is granted she notes that life in the form of a new baby is impossible without her husband...

All the singing was strong, with Zion Daoratanahong as Savitri delivering ethereal passages to



NADANAI LAOHAKUNAKORN conducts the Siam Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble in 'Savitri'.

convey the night-time of life that is death. At other times her notes were penetrating, showing the indomitable will of Savitri.

Matching her passion was Antoine Garth as Satyavan, forceful at times, but solidly lyrical. The pair shared a powerful chemistry that was especially moving when they were locked in each other's arms. As for Death, Pitchaya Kemasingki used dark, ominous tones for an intense effect that focussed the audience on the surrealism of the story. The moment

where he wrapped Satayavan in a black shroud was as gentle as it was horrific.

The female members of the Siam Orpheus Choir sang beautifully and the youthful Siam Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble rose to the challenge of this technically demanding piece, which was ably conducted by Nadanai who took every opportunity to bring forth the dark hues in the score.

The dramatic direction, shared jointly by Stefan Sanchez and Somtow Sucharitkul, was also a success, with the interplay of characters grabbing our attention.

A note of controversy, however, came with the finale, which altered Holst's original ending. Having tricked Death, Savitri and Satyavan

go ahead to try to produce life – but in the final moment of the production their baby is shown stillborn, with Death given the ultimate victory. Nasty!

Two movements from Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" were also on the programme, performed by the teenage Shouen-Thai Quartet. The surprise in their performance came from its maturity and insight. Yes, there were a few raw edges (remarkably few) but the overwhelming impression was one of a deep understanding of the music as well as a closeness of ensemble that combined a contemplative mood and a well-paced freshness.

First violinist Natthapong Yutthanasirikul displayed a dance-like technique in passages of true virtuosity while Wishwin Sureeratanakorn contributed sublime cello playing quite beyond his tender years. The playing of violist Atjayut Sangkasem and second violin Tanayut Jansirivorkul was also strikingly accomplished.

A big "bravo" is due not only to this talented young group but also to Opera Siam's Somtow for bringing them together.



ZION DAORATANBAHONG as Savitri and Antoine Garth as Satyavan embrace.