

# 'Soffel' opera scores well in all departments

By Mark Kanny

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Theater's power to illuminate human behavior finds fulfillment in "The Biddle Boys and Mrs. Soffel," a superb new opera by Jeremy Beck that premiered this weekend in Pittsburgh.

Commissioned and performed by the Tuesday Musical Club, the three-act opera is based on real events in Pittsburgh in 1902.

## Review

Two thieves, Ed and John Biddle, bungle a robbery by killing a grocer and are sentenced to be hanged. While in the Allegheny County jail, the warden's wife, Katherine Soffel, reads the Bible to them, as she does for other prisoners. She falls for Ed Biddle, helps the brothers escape, and — after they are killed — she is sentenced to five years in jail.

The story was told in the 1985 film "Mrs. Soffel" that starred Diane Keaton and Mel Gibson. Although the film had star power, the opera has theatrical power.

Beck wrote the libretto and music, presenting a richly textured picture of human motivation, and doesn't shy away from contradictory impulses.

The heart of the drama is Mrs. Soffel's decision to abandon her husband and children and go off with the Biddle boys.

During the prelude, we see that Katherine Soffel has become disaffected with her husband even before she met the Biddles, yet she resists Ed's initial romantic approaches.



Joe Wojcik/Tribune-Review

Ja-Nae Duane, Brent Stater (center) and Robert Frankenberry in a scene from the delightful opera "The Biddle Boys & Mrs. Soffel."

She is motivated by justice, and finds it hard to resist when Ed says, "Don't let them kill us." Her religion is no pretense, and she is troubled about leaving her family. Beck shows us in word and music that Katherine is a torn person.

Beck's musical style is appealing yet never panders. His melodies are American in accent, often with chromatic inflections reminiscent of English composer Benjamin Britten, and his rhythms change meters fluently.

His ensemble writing — duos, trios, quartets and quintets — is supremely assured. He even combines groups in the foreground with others toward the rear of the stage, never miscalculating. His choral writing is effective, too.

The production was as sophisticated as the music. Helen Mead's

clarity of purpose was essential for the many split stage pieces. In the last act, for example, the judge in Mrs. Soffel's trial is seen simultaneously with the killing of the Biddle boys and her capture that preceded the trial. Yet there was no confusion with the court behind a scrim.

The performance was carried by professionals but included amateurs, in keeping with Tuesday Musical Club's mission. Normally, the harmonic and rhythmic elements found in Beck's score would prevent amateur participation, but he was clever, and the amateurs obviously worked hard.

Soprano Lorriana Markovic was compelling as Katherine Soffel, emotionally forthright but attentive to the precision that makes this opera memorable. Although her

voice tended to spread when forced, she seems a flexible singer with an appealing timbre.

Baritone Brent Stater's portrayal did not depend on his tall good looks. It was a carefully acted well-vocalized performance.

Margaret Dietrich as Katherine's mother, Robert Frankenberry as John Biddle and Ja-Nae Duane as the spurned girlfriend also were excellent in important roles. Although some smaller roles were weak or inaccurate at times, the general level of performance was impressive.

The opera is scored for violin and piano, both well played at Sunday's performance. John Moyer carried the bulk of the music at the keyboard, and brought welcome vigor and assurance. The excellence of violinist Mary Beth Glasgow, a member of Pittsburgh's other orchestra (Pittsburgh Opera, Ballet Theater, etc.) vindicated Beck's unorthodox instrumentation.

"The Biddle Boys and Mrs. Soffel" was more successful compositionally and in staging than many new works seen at major opera houses. Financial support from The Heinz Endowment Fund helped Tuesday Musical Club to add an impressive accomplishment to its distinguished history.