

'Black Water' runs deep, strikes chord

By **CARL J. HALPERIN**

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This past Saturday night, Nelson Music Room was the place to be, as Steven Jaffe's series, "Encounters with the Music of Our Times," began a season devoted to works by recent Duke

composition graduates now making their way out in the world.

Since leaving Durham some 10 years ago, composer Jeremy Beck, the first returning Duke alum to be honored this year, has been making a name for himself as a creator of monodramas, in which a single artist takes on multiple roles within a storyline, aided by an accompanist. As his work in this new arena has intensified, so too, Beck's attention has turned toward subject matter that fulfills his interest in presenting "parallel construction."

This last concept, incorporating technical cinematic aspects of flashbacks and overlapping of unrelated events, proves enthralling.

The theatrical and operatic worlds have become more closely aligned these days, what with directors such as Johnathan Miller and now George Lucas (who will take on Wagner's "Ring" cycle in Los Angeles over the next few years) jumping into the fray, that Beck's ideas seem slightly less than cutting-edge.

That isn't to deny their genius, however, as anyone who heard his "Black Water" on Saturday night will attest. If they are able to talk about it, that is.

Over a century ago, Wagner had envisioned it — "das Kunstwerk der Zukunft," he called it at the time, or the "art of the future" — in which diverse elements of expression join to make a complete whole. Beck's way with this idiom, stunning in its intensity, makes a powerful statement for the continuation of music as a means of illuminating human response.

"Black Water," based on Joyce Carol Oates' 1992 novella of the same name, euphemistically recounts the tragic events of July 1969 on Chappaquiddick Island, when Sen. Ted Kennedy's car spiraled off a bridge, killing its occupant Mary Jo Kopechne, a longtime Kennedy supporter.

At the time of the accident, Kopechne was secretary to Bobby Kennedy and, before that, had been an active supporter of JFK, but now was enthralled with the youngest brother and his ultimate race for the White House. She was, by all accounts, the ultimate Kennedy "groupie."

That may seem harsh, though in Oates' and Beck's version of the story (which for legal reasons, most likely, refers to the characters in the broadest possible terms), it is the "senator" (no names are given) who is painted in the most cavalier manner, pushing "Kelly," his female passenger, out of his way in order to save himself, and then making his way, limping, to a phone booth in order to contact

political cronies to beg for help in the cover-up, as the woman suffocates nearby in the "black water... black water that smells of sewage, so cold, even in summer."

So much for the basic historical outline, which Beck, and Oates, found secondary to the story of moral corruption that lies at the heart of it. Beck has said that he wonders whether knowledge of the actual event is crucial to understanding his motivation; as many in Saturday's audience were too young to remember Chappaquiddick, anyway, it is a moot point.

It is worth noting that a full-length opera on the same subject has been composed by John Duffy, which I've not heard, though in the here and now, Beck's more minimalist ideas seem just right in length, shape and scope.

Bringing this sad tale to the stage was a yeoman job, to be sure, and once Beck had fashioned down a 45-minute outline from the book, it was given to "Kelly" to speak for herself as a child, as the giddy young woman about to meet the "senator" at a party, and then as the victim waiting for him to return to save her following the accident. Her description of the events preceding, following, and especially during the actual process of her drowning sent a chill up the spine.

Beck's music throughout, suggestive of her wide-eyed innocent wish above all to be a "good girl," was descriptive and perfectly timed to speed the story along at a fast clip, from early life to ultimate tragedy.

Perhaps it's our basic human fascination with death, the unknown, that makes Beck's work so terrifying, though his understanding of the percussive aspects of the keyboard (masterfully played by Jane Hawkins) add in no small measure to the reality and finality of life, which is so very fragile.

Beck said he "couldn't be happier with the performers" on this occasion, marking this a "definitive" performance, and little wonder. Partnering Hawkins was soprano Terry Rhodes in the lead role, telling the story from the victim's perspective, and doing so with grace, elegance, and naturally endearing radiance. Vulnerable to a fault, one wanted to dash to the stage in order to rescue her, and listened to her every word, for the most part expertly vocalized, as she remarked helplessly on her situation. A stunning achievement from both performers.

It took Mary Jo Kopechne more than two hours to die in the "black water" off Martha's Vineyard 31 years ago. In the years since, the Kennedy name has become ever more synonymous with tragedy, disregard for law and order, and political maneuvering. In this political year of 2000, the memory of Chappaquiddick couldn't be more timely and certainly gives one much to think about.