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In Philadelphia, an Operatic Portrait of a Stepmother for the Ages

By STEVE SMITH

PHILADELPHIA — Unsettling news from the financially struggling Philadelphia Orchestra, whose recent announcement of shortened seasons, a smaller ensemble and a populist programming agenda sent tremors of shock and dismay throughout the classical-music world, paints a bleak prognosis for progressive artistic initiatives here. But look at what's going on in the city this month, and a different picture emerges.

Now on offer from Bowerbird, an independent producer of interdisciplinary arts programs, is “[American Sublime](#),” an ambitious weeklong sequence of concerts and lectures devoted to the late works of the composer Morton Feldman. Elsewhere [the Crossing](#), a professional chamber choir, is presenting Month of Moderns, a three-concert series devoted to contemporary music.

And in the Perelman Theater, an intimate space at the Kimmel Center, just steps away from the Philadelphia Orchestra's dimly regarded home at Verizon Hall, the [Opera Company of Philadelphia](#) has scored a substantial artistic coup with the American premiere of “Phaedra,” a compelling 2007 opera by [Hans Werner Henze](#). Part of the company's growing contemporary chamber-opera initiative, a new production directed by Robert B. Driver, opened on Friday night.

That this opera, an 80-minute setting of a German libretto by Christian Lehnert, exists at all is something of a miracle. Mr. Henze had announced that his previous opera, “[L'Upupa](#),” or “The Hoopoe, and the Triumph of Filial Love” (2003), would be his last. Then, having completed most of the first act of