

***Bandanna* proves well worth the effort**

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Carolyn Wardele

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With a flash of the Southwest's signature scarf, Daron Hagen began the prologue of his new opera, *Bandanna*. Produced by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas College of Fine Arts, the work was presented in concert setting as Tuesday evening's performance became the preliminary recording of an Arsis Audio release.

Bandanna retells the story of Shakespeare's "Othello," but with a contemporary twist.

Hagen's setting is a small border town between the United States and Mexico. And his conflict is that which besets any organization mandated to enforce the political agenda of government -- loyalty.

Treachery surrounds Chief of Police Miguel Morales (Mark Thomsen), His best friend and deputy, Jake Lopez (James Demler), thwarts the very laws he has sworn to uphold by providing safe passage for illegal immigration. James Kane (Paul Kreider), a labor organizer from Chicago, vows to ruin the lawman who continually disperses his farm worker gatherings. And Mona Morales (Darynn Zimmer) repentant from her past affair, tries to rebuild a shattered trust.

It is the personal loyalty that consumes Miguel and also propels the work to its tragic conclusion.

There is difficulty in determining the theatricality of an opera without proper staging. However, since music is the vehicle that carries the story, a concert performance becomes an integral opportunity to evaluate its merit. And in this aspect, *Bandanna* is a banner of triumph.

Hagen's descriptive music soars and swells, invoking tender hopefulness in Mona's prayer of faith, while also describing the intense emotions of the distraught Miguel with discordant chord structuring and rhythmic patterns.

The sweep of the music is compelling. And many kudos should go to the UNLV Wind Orchestra and UNLV Opera Chorus and University Singers. Hagen's score is difficult, and the student organizations perform it beautifully and with maturity. Rusty Blevins' soprano saxophone solos are particularly haunting and effective.

Vital to any opera are the singers who bring the characters to life. Hagen has assembled a fine cast. Travis Lewis (Cassidy), Lesly deGroot (Emily), Alfonse Anderson (Leader of the Company) and Zimmer give fine performances.

But it is Thomsen and Kreider who transcend the limitations of the concert setting to give breath to the characters they portray. Thomsen communicates the angst, the sorrow and the consuming anger of Miguel with sensitive dynamic pull and artistically sensitive phrasing. Vocal clarity is exquisite, and his lyric tenor colors the very soul of the tortured police chief.

Kreider, who plays the villain, coats his gorgeous baritone with menace and sarcasm. Kane only sees the underbelly of the human condition, and Kreider communicates that jaded opinion with the emotional commitment of an artist.

Musically, Hagen's work is glorious. If the theatricality of *Bandanna* proves to be as fine, then this opera should be destined to become a standard in the repertoire.