

Alan Turing: A New Opera's Long Gestation Period Pays Off

By Hannah Edgar, *Musical America*

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CHICAGO—Even in this lively arts town, for two principal opera companies to unveil world premieres over the same weekend is unprecedented.

On March 24, [Lyric Opera of Chicago premiered *Proximity*](#), a megawatt, mixed-up triptych of new operas by John Luther Adams, Caroline Shaw, and Daniel Bernard Roumain. On March 25, Chicago Opera Theater offered the second of two performances of *The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing*, by composer Justine F. Chen and librettist David Simpatico. The latter was the weekend's runaway success.

Turing was first commissioned by American Lyric Theater in 2012, then incubated there and at COT over the intervening decade. Those extra years were apparently put to good use. Alan Turing's biography is so rich that any operatic treatment presents a formidable challenge. In his too-short 41 years, Turing devised key theories that paved the way for the modern computer and likely shaved years off World War II by leading a team of cryptologists that cracked the German army's Enigma code. He is almost equally remembered as a victim of anti-gay persecution, sentenced to "chemical castration" after his affairs with men were uncovered by British authorities. He died in 1954, two years after his trial, in a likely suicide.



*Jonathan Richie as the title character in the world premiere of *The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing**

That's where *Turing* begins, in a surrealistic and sometimes zany account of the multihyphenate's life. Simpatico wisely glosses over the finer points of Turing's research in service of an engaging narrative, and Chen's potent score flings the drama aloft with an appealingly broad expressive palette. She places a special emphasis on extended techniques: string players bow on the side of their instruments and wind players breathe tonelessly through their instruments; choristers drum their fingers on their music folders to mimic the muted sound of rain. Chen's vocal writing likewise

brims with inventive word-painting: The words “chat,” “chit,” and variations thereof recur in choral interludes throughout the opera, their crackling consonance echoing the clicking sounds of Turing’s code-breaking machines.

The opera’s economical, elegant use of those choral interludes is particularly ingenious. Dressed in Oxbridge-ish academic robes, *Turing*’s chorus both chants and sings eddying, rhythmic phrases from behind a scrim-cum-projector screen on the set’s second level: *Click. Codebreaker. Churchill. England at war. Hut 8. Hitler Rising. Alan at twenty-nine. 1942.* Paired with projections, the “chat clouds,” as they’re dubbed in the program and libretto, orient viewers amid scene changes. Occasional choristers exit their perches to assume ensemble roles.

In director Peter Rothstein’s staging, Benjamin Olsen’s stark yet streamlined steel design evokes something halfway between wartime industrialism and the Space Age imaginings of *Star Wars*. It’s both past and future, retro and futurist—quite apropos for *Turing*.

Like the real Turing, the Turing of the opera is not a plaster saint but a quirky savant. Jonathan Michie, part of the project since its inception, played Turing’s eccentric charm to the hilt. The opera is a near unbroken two-hour showcase for the title role, and Michie’s big, handsomely blooming baritone seized the occasion. Perhaps *Turing*’s most rapturously Romantic, yet shattering, moment comes early, when he shares an intimate moment with his grade school classmate Christopher. Turing spends the rest of the opera chasing that bliss, and Michie plots the emotional topography of the role accordingly.



Alan Turing faces trial in Chicago Opera Theater’s staging of The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing

Supporting singers were uniformly solid. Justin Berkowitz’s character tenor hit the right blend of brash and brittle as Arnold Murray, the self-loathing young thief who leads to Turing’s downfall. Bass-baritone Richard Ollarsaba brought a punchy vocal delivery and sauntering stage presence to Fred Clayton, Turing’s jockish ex; later, Ollarsaba gloweringly casts imperatives down like lightning as the judge in Turing’s indecency trial. David Salsbery Fry’s sinewy, wry bass makes rewarding moments of small roles as Turing’s nosy boss, a police officer, and the trial prosecutor.

The women of the opera get saddled with Chen’s less inspired vocal writing, and their performances pale comparatively as a result. Nonetheless, soprano Teresa Castillo glitteringly executes coloratura acrobatics as Turing’s mother, and mezzo-soprano Taylor Raven, her voice pliant, brings a gentle kindness to Turing’s onetime fiancée Joan Clarke.

COT Music Director Lidiya Yankovskaya has led workshops of *Turing* since its American Lyric Theater days, and her deep expertise was manifest in her canny, crystalline leadership. It's not every day one goes rifling through a program to find out who ran dialect coachings, but Susan Gosdick's work with *Turing*'s cast—who speak in accents ranging from received pronunciation, to Cockney, to Scottish—reflected notable attention to detail.

Despite *Turing*'s many years of workshopping, two troubling vulnerabilities still made their way into the final iteration. During the trial scene, Turing fantasizes about objecting to his sentence of forced feminizing hormone therapy. “This so-called miracle cure is no cure at all! ... Organo-estrogen therapy is mutilation! It will not save lives!” Michie sings with upper-register urgency. His sentiments echo, nearly verbatim, talking points [currently lobbed in state legislatures across the U.S.](#) to oppose gender-affirming healthcare for minors. The fact that *Turing* is being mounted contemporaneously with those hearings is no doubt a coincidence, but one would think an opera decrying “institutionalized prejudice” (per Simpatico's program note) would be more sensitive to the parallels.

Turing's ending also bemuses. Not only is it hard to follow, but it frames Turing's suicide as his final scientific breakthrough, in which he transcends the world of flesh and reunites his soul with Christopher's. But a suicide is still a suicide; trying to gussy it up as a genius's misunderstood triumph is senseless and misguided. Still, the opera surmounts its missteps. One got the sense that an audience member could know next to nothing about Turing and leave moved. That fine balance is rare, not only in opera but in any biographical fictionalization.