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CCM gives 'Albert Herring' balance, believability

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Benjamin Britten's chamber opera *Albert Herring* may not be as familiar to American audiences as *Carmen* and *La Bohème*, but it strikes a chord close to human nature.

Director Jonathan Eaton has succeeded in finding the human side to this lighthearted parody, presented in Patricia Corbett Theater at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music over the weekend.

In an opera that pokes fun at small-town moral hypocrisy, the

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danger is allowing its stock characters — schoolmarm, vicar, policeman, Lady Bountiful — to become slapstick caricatures. There was plenty of humor — evidenced by frequent chuckles from the 300 present Saturday afternoon — but Mr. Eaton kept it keenly balanced and believable. The action was quick-paced, and staging was visually interesting, yet it never detracted from Britten's wonderful score. Best of all in this ensemble opera, the cast was quite natural

together and singing was first-rate.

The whimsical, pastel set by Tom Umfrid and imaginative lighting (T.L. Codella) lightened the Victorian heaviness of the furnishings, costumes (by T. Tyler Stumpf) and somewhat dated story line. As it goes, the small town of Loxford is seeking a May Queen, and Lady Billows (sung Saturday afternoon by Elizabeth Harrison) announces a prize of 25 sovereigns. But the committee can't come up with a suitably virtuous young girl, so Policeman Budd (Philip Horst) proposes a May King — Albert Herring, who is "a bit

simple" and lives with his mother.

Enunciation was excellent among the cast. Assistant conductor Kenneth Woods, who was alert, efficient and confident, stayed with the singers unflaggingly and only sometimes overpowered. (Gerhard Samuel conducted the other performances.)

The 13-piece orchestra created a sense of atmosphere between scene changes and punctuated the text colorfully — such as the love-potion motif from *Tristan and Isolde* that could be heard while Albert drank his rum laced lemonade.

The singers ranged from excep-

tional to good, with the women tending to push the sound in upper registers. In the title role, Gary Seydell captured Albert Herring's wide range of emotions in Act 2 expertly — from insecurity to the slow realization that he had been manipulated, to disgust and anger. Equally persuasive was Scott Gregory, who as Sid, stood out for natural stage presence and smoothness of vocal projection.

His duets with Nancy (sweetly sung by Elizabeth Saunders) absolutely sizzled. Robert Avrett was a smooth, focused standout as the Vicar. Philip Horst was a blustery

basso as the police superintendent and Chris Riggins (the mayor) played an expressive tenor that one would have liked to hear more from.

Ms. Harrison hammed it up. Lady Billows and projected a forceful, sometimes strident vocal through her taxing vocal role.

Other strong contributions were made by Jennifer Capaldo, as the prim and proper housekeeper, Eliza Helfont, as the excited schoolmarm and Laura Backley, Mrs. Herring.