

Theater Review: Delight at the opera

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Flour will be flying tonight at the Columbus Theatre, as mezzo-soprano Vanessa Schukis whips up American composer Lee Hoiby's one-act delight, *Bon Appetit*. The opera, based on a 1971 episode of Julia Child's French Chef TV show, is one of two solo offerings from Opera Providence this weekend.

The other is Hoiby's setting of the Ruth Draper monologue *The Italian Lesson*, with Rhode Island-bred mezzo Valerie Nicolosi as the harried New York socialite trying to master Dante amid the chaos of her hectic life. Both operas are real showpieces for a couple of excellent singers.

In *Bon Appetit*, Schukis, who was made up to look like a young, matronly Child, sets out to prepare a French chocolate cake, buttering pans, melting chocolate and whipping up egg whites — much of which ends up on the floor.

"Chocolate," sings Schukis, while tossing together ingredients, "is much more complicated than any of us suspects."

Schukis is a hoot, often capturing Child's enthusiastic cluck. The show is funny, entertaining and to the point. But it is not nearly as substantial a piece as *The Italian Lesson*, which has some lush, post-Romantic writing that really lets Nicolosi blossom.

And she was in fine voice for yesterday morning's student dress rehearsal, as her character interrupted her language lesson to deal with kids, field phone calls, plan dinner and take time out for a manicure.

The sets are simple but effective — a counter with a steaming pot of water and a wall with two faux ovens for *Bon Appetit*, and elegant tables and chairs laid out on an Oriental rug for *The Italian Lesson*.

Music director Timothy Steele presided over a crack chamber orchestra made up mostly of Rhode Island Philharmonic members.

While Hoiby's music is not as grand as Puccini, with no death scenes or sweeping love duets, these two confections are bound to hit the spot.

Opera Providence performs Hoiby's two one-act operas tonight at 8 and Sunday afternoon at 3 at the Columbus Theatre, 270 Broadway, Providence. Tickets are \$20-\$60. Call (401) 331-6060 or visit artixri.com.