

► Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, successfully used such a process to transfer or sell around 30,000 inherited objects that were no longer relevant to its mission. This large-scale, strategic disposal of objects, including texts and ethnological and military-history collections, allowed the museum to sharpen its focus and release resources for other core sections. Importantly, the move was recognized as valid by the public. The distribution of pieces also boosted the value of the collections they joined.

Deaccession is never simple, and is not to be undertaken lightly. Hastily conceived action could mean big losses for future generations. But meticulously planned disposals for the right reasons are preferable to the disposal of an entire collection, as has happened in the past.

Happily, such disposals may not be the final curtain in every case. Spallanzani's great museum in Pavia may have a future. The collection — a once-cherished jewel of our city and country that has lain dormant for more

than 70 years — was only disbanded, not permanently disposed of. We, at the University of Pavia, are about to begin the process of reconstituting a great part of the original collection for eventual display here, to grant a future to a vital window onto the past. ■

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## CHEMISTRY

# An elemental heroine

An opera on the astonishing life of Marie Curie entralls Stefan Michalowski and Georgia Smith.

Marie Curie's life seems to be ready-made for grand opera: the brilliant heroine who overcomes poverty and prejudice to marry her soulmate and work with him as an equal, winning a Nobel prize. Then, the tragedy of her husband's accidental death, the scandal of her affair with a married colleague, a second Nobel, heroic war work and her own sad death caused by years of exposure to radiation. Now it is indeed an opera: Polish composer Elżbieta Sikora's *Madame Curie* premiered in Paris on 15 November, and was performed in Gdansk, Poland, on 23–26 November.

Director Marek Weiss brought a full orchestra, cast and chorus from the Baltic Opera of Gdansk to the headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris for the opening, as part of the International Year of Chemistry.

Sikora's work has been widely performed in contemporary-music venues. She has written large choral pieces, but her two previous operas are on a smaller scale than *Madame Curie*, which has a big, ambitious score that is as precisely wrought as a chamber work. The music is atonal, but is full of attractive melodic structures.

Intriguing orchestral textures are seamlessly integrated with pre-recorded electro-acoustic segments, which Sikora created in collaboration with Argentinian composer Diego Losa. Conductor Wojciech Michniewski elicited a fine performance from the orchestra and chorus in Paris. The cast of fresh-voiced young singers acquitted themselves well, particularly soprano Anna Mikołajczyk as Marie.

The opera does not delve into Curie's scientific discoveries, nor does it try to depict



Soprano Anna Mikołajczyk as Marie Curie.

the excitement that gripped the research community during the birth of subatomic physics in the early 1900s. Sikora said in a pre-show interview that she “was looking for a strong woman character”, and although the stage set is the Curies' rudimentary laboratory, it is Marie as a heroic woman that we see, rather than Marie as a brilliant scientific mind.

As the opera opens, she enters in her nightgown, reading a letter from the Swedish Academy that asks her not to come to Stockholm to accept her second Nobel prize because of the public scandal about her affair with physicist Paul Langevin. The rest of the opera is a succession of scenes from her life,

**Madame Curie**  
COMPOSED BY  
ELŻBIETA SIKORA;  
LIBRETTO BY AGATA  
MIKLASZEWSKA  
UNESCO Headquarters,  
Paris.  
15 November 2011.

presented with little or no visual demarcation. Weiss explained in an interview that he envisioned the opera as a dream that Marie has after receiving the letter. This didn't

come across clearly on stage, however, and at first the plot was confusing. But once the spectator gets used to the impressionist-fantasy narrative style, it works.

Weiss has created several beautifully effective scenes, notably Marie's grief after Pierre's death, a comic duel over the Langevin affair, and scenes in which the chorus plays a fickle public vacillating between idolizing Curie and despising her. The finale is particularly powerful: as the orchestra builds a stunning crescendo, Marie hobbles from the stage supporting the lifeless body of a dancer who has been her symbolic double throughout.

The music for the voices spans the spectrum from intense lyricism to plain speech. Marie's aria lamenting Pierre's death, movingly performed by Mikołajczyk, is a striking combination of late-Romantic aesthetic articulated through the idiom of contemporary music. Sikora has a flair for the sudden quiet of instrumental solos: one dance sequence is accompanied only by a long, ravishing clarinet solo. More such moments might be welcome in what is otherwise a relentless pattern of repeated, hard-hitting climaxes in both drama and music.

There is one serious disappointment in the way this story is told. Directly after the overture, an aged man resembling Albert Einstein appears to Marie. He warns her that devastating consequences could result from her work, and urges her to stop. A video projection of a mushroom cloud rams home the point.

Marie shakes off this vision, insisting on the necessity of pursuing the truth. But associating Curie with nuclear weapons is untenable — the relevant discoveries were made shortly before and after her death. Attributing the ethical choices of later scientists to her makes no more sense than the dismissive sexism she endured during her lifetime. ■

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