The Juniper Tree, June Opera Magazine 2017

The Helen Astrid Singing Academy at the Hammond Theatre, Hampton School, March 30

What a strange way to make an opera! In the summer of 1984, soon after Akhnaten was premiered, Philip Glass co-composed a chamber opera called *The Juniper Tree* with Robert Moran. The libretto of this 'grimmest of Grimm fairy tales' – in an apt description given by the conductor of this production Andy Langley – is by Arthur Yorinks; this provides some fine moments, beautiful as well as gruesome, though the opera's closing 20 minutes or so seem rather protracted. A wicked stepmother murders her stepson, and her new husband unwittingly consumes him in a casserole; but the boy's bones eventually restore him to live via the magical properties of a juniper tree. In two acts, lasting around 90 minutes, if taken without an interval, the opera formed part of Glass's personal project in the mid 1980s to set texts in the English language for the first time in his mature career. *The Juniper Tree's* range of vocal opportunities, including substantial solo roles for two children and both an adult and a children's chorus, make it an appropriate vehicle for the Helen Astrid Singing Academy, an admirable community-based scheme run by the eponymous soprano, which gives operatic experience working with professionals to both children and amateur adults.

This production – in the well-appointed theatre of Hampton School in south-west London – was imaginatively directed by Donna Stirrup. Avoiding any overload of psychological or other symbolism, it relied on simple sets and costumes (by Laura Jane Stanfield); lighting (by Daniel Dar-Nell), notably to represent the juniper tree itself, played a major role. It was generally stronger on the magical elements - for instance, the luminous 'bones' of the boy being brought back to life in a lovely choreographic sequence what was, however, repeated at least once too often – than the gruesome ones, though I relished the cannibalistic stew's splendidly macabre preparation and consumption. This carefully-prepared performance, the first of two, constituted, surprisingly, the opera's first British performance.

In the earlier stages, quite large portions of text are set in alternation by the famous composer and his lesser-known colleague; later on, the changeovers between them appear to speed up. Glass generally, thought not exclusively, gets the more reflective passages; Moran, with a more conventional approach to the ways in which music can relate to patterns with lots of arpeggios and occasional chromatic surprises. Moran's idiom veers from gauchely dissonant gestures, by no means always dramatically effective, to music that resembles wrong-note Leonard Bernstein. Neither composer – somewhat unusually for Glass, at least – gives the solo singers any really memorable melodies.

Among the professional singers, the soprano Mariya Krywaniuk as the Stepmother, the largest single role, suffered particularly at Moran's hands: after a nervous start, she managed some moments of fairly wicked passion, but was too easily drowned out by what was happening in the pit (not, I think, Langely's fault). James Corrigan (the Husband, a baritone), Rebecca Moon (the Wife, soprano) and Philippa Murray (Mama Bird, soprano) also all accurate and stylish, even if the acting in general wasn't especially subtle. All were outshone by the tenor Joshua Baxter's exquisitely sung Cobbler, a minor part. In the child roles of the Son and the Daughter, Angus Whitworth and Lia Tynan were compellingly affecting, as were both the choruses. Langley's 16-piece band served the score's varied demands quite well, though the more energetic passages occasionally came over as timbrally rather raw.

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