

ROUND-UP

Fringe Opera in England

Opera della Luna

The UK Premiere of Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers* introduces an opera that, in its one-act, 90-minute span, manages to traverse three decades, and a vast amount of emotion. While Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* (2000) attained huge success, nothing since has quite scaled those heights.

Commissioned by Houston Grand Opera in 2008, *Three Decembers* is based on Terence McNally's *Some Christmas Letters*, to a libretto by Gene Scheer. The 'three Decembers' in question are 1986, 1996 and 2006. As AIDS cast its horrific shadow, the opera follows the dysfunctional family of Madeleine Mitchell (an actress, played by Lucy Schauer), her daughter Bea (Llio Evans) and her son Charlie (Jean-Kristof Bouton). Heggie's achievement in taking a wordy libretto and creating a musico-dramatic structure that is both intelligible and intelligent should not be under-estimated. Swearing in opera always raises an eyebrow ('Fuck you and Merry Christmas!') but also adds a touch of realism.

Heggie writes with a light touch, using an 11-person ensemble (some players doubling instruments). He is able to move between a variety of idioms, sometimes veering towards musical theatre (the original idea for the piece), sometimes magnificently, soul-touchingly wistful. Contemporary opera in the vernacular is a vital part of American operatic life (think the likes of David Conte, Daron Hagen and, recently, Lori Laitman, three fine exponents). Heggie's contribution is above the norm, illuminated here by a fine cast and sure direction.

Director Jeff Clarke, artistic director of Opera della Luna since its inception in 1994, dedicates this production to Gervase Jackson-Stops, one of Opera della Luna's first trustees who died of AIDS in 1995, and to other actors and musicians who died from the disease. Elroy Ashmore's sets are simple *in extremis*: a telephone, some boxes, a pole, all easily manipulated while Heggie's interludes play. Context is provided, but the power comes from the music and performances.

A triumph of a performance: The cast of Opera della Luna's *Three Decembers* Llio Evans, Jean-Kristof Bouton and Lucy Schauer



Motherly love? Lucy Schauer and Llio Evans

The respected mezzo Lucy Schauer is magnificent as the matriarch Madeleine, a powerhouse performance from a musician of real presence (both vocally and in stage terms). Charlie's long monologue in the 1996 section ('Each day I write you four little lines') was a real highlight; Bouton's baritone voice is beautifully strong and resonant, never forced, counterpointed by the spiky oboe of Alec Harman. Finally, Llio Evans' account of Madeleine's daughter Bea, bright-voiced and nicely contrastive, revealed a satisfyingly layered character. A triumph of a performance of a notable work.

★★★★★

Colin Clarke

Three Decembers will return to The Lowry in Salford on 27-29 September
www.operadellaluna.org

The Opera Story

Beauty is gazing into a mirror. As with all good fairytales, this looking-glass can talk – although things are not so simple as telling the user they are the fairest of them all. This orb is part of Magic Mirror Systems, a dating service that offers a seven-day true-love guarantee. Naturally, there is a sting in the tale: the matchmaker – revealed later as Beast – is incentivised to organise truly terrifying dates so that Beauty is destined to turn into a toad. *Beauty and the Seven Beasts* mixes themes from *Beauty and the Beast* and the *Seven Deadly Sins*. Its near-future setting – plus the odd anachronism – makes the story part *Shrek*, part Sondheim – with a score that’s as quirky as it is distinctive.

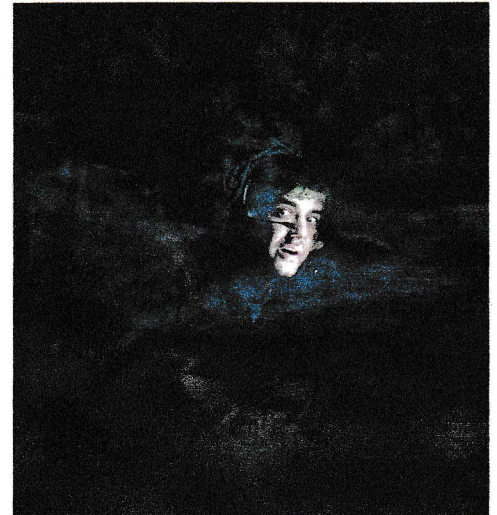
The composer is Grimm-like too – a seven-headed creature that divides to rule. Each sin scene was created by a different composer-librettist team, with Vahan Salorian providing a degree of continuity with similarly styled interludes.

(This multi-commissioning approach was also recently taken by the Royal Opera House for *Lost and Found*, a seven-part series based on train-travel anecdotes submitted to the ROH by members of the public, as part of the Europalia

Trains & Tracks Festival, which was held at St Pancras station last International Women’s Day.)

Sometimes the multiplicity of creative voices jars – we move from rhyming couplets to long monologues and snappy dialogue – but generally the patchwork is neatly sewn. Beauty (Katherine Aitken) and Beast (Dan D’Souza) are superb tailors, both delivering challenging and varied solos, often just metres away from the audience.

This is part of The Opera Story’s shtick. Previous productions – all based on well-known stories, such as *Goldilocks and the Three Little Pigs* – have been performed in non-traditional settings in south London (the 2019 reimagining of *Robin Hood* was the last show, held at the Bussey Building in Peckham). Brixton Jamm, better known for its club-nights than opera, provides the perfect canvas for The Opera Story. Beauty is positioned in the centre of the room, surrounded by the audience, who are seated in between three large screens. Outside this circle, Beast crouches in his call-centre lair, moving into the inner ring as the drama unfolds. D’Souza’s rich baritone boomed in this small space; Aiken’s thinner, but no less effective, mezzo-soprano is amplified by



Dan D’Souza as Beast

her first-rate acting. Each date appears on the screens, moving between the panels with simultaneous footage. This meant that the majority of the parts could be pre-recorded – an inventive work-around for a project that has been curtailed by Covid for several years.

Berrak Dyer conducts from a corner, bringing together live and recorded performances (including the orchestra). The technique suited the sound and story, and, while Beauty battled cables to fix her fictional connection (‘My internet’s been playing up’) and Gene’s screen flashes to reveal his alter egos (Greed), the real-life digital elements all ran smoothly. The on-screen dates also included a cannibal (Gluttony), a narcissist (Envy), the perfect man – who turns out to be a stand-in (Lust), manipulative Zoe (Wrath), deluded King Gerald (Pride) and an animal that lives up to its namesake (Sloth).

★★★★★

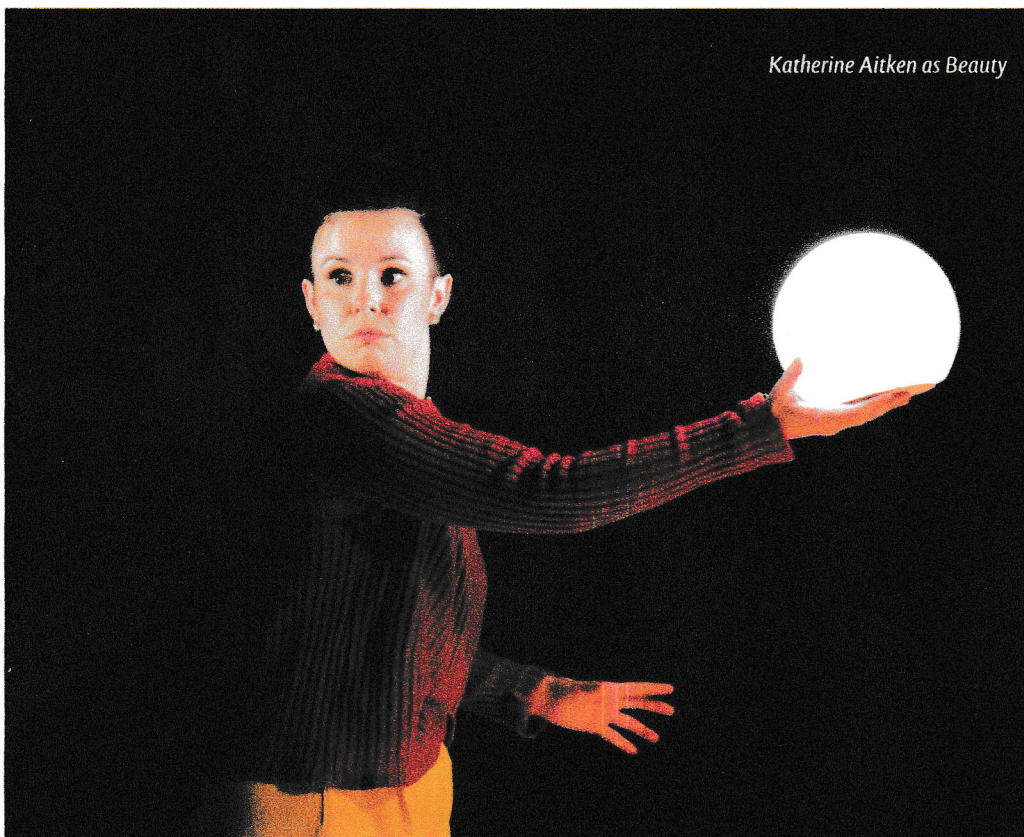
Claire Jackson

Hurn Court Opera

Hurn Court Opera gives performance opportunities to young opera singers providing valuable experience at the start of a professional career. The company also holds an annual singing competition and then features the winners and finalists in its productions.

Its impressive *Dido and Aeneas* was performed in Salisbury and Bournemouth last year, followed by performances this spring of Donizetti’s comic opera *Don Pasquale* at the Regent Centre, Christchurch and the Blackledge Theatre in Salisbury.

Katherine Aitken as Beauty



The production transported us to a stylish and fun 1950s *Roman Holiday* setting, and the company created a thoroughly Italian atmosphere in the middle of southern England. The musical style and excellent Italian pronunciation were admirable and made for a most enjoyable evening at the opera. There was some fine singing. It was hard to believe that the soprano, Miku Yasukawa, had never appeared in a fully staged opera before. Her Norina had charm and a natural comic timing, and she displayed dazzling coloratura and impressive top notes. Her lover, Ernesto, was the tenor Chris Mosz, who is in his final year at the Royal College of Music in London. This is certainly a voice to watch with a rare elegance of tone and wide range that would be perfect for Rossini and Mozart roles in particular, which can be a challenge to cast. Donizetti gives us impressive duets throughout the opera and Malatesta and Don Pasquale were particularly well-matched and received a deserved encore for the Act III duo where

they both displayed virtuoso buffo style.

Particularly charming was the 'Nocturn' duet 'Tornami a dir che m'ami' for Norina and Ernesto also in Act III. Thomas Chenhall (Malatesta) has a powerful stage presence and honey-toned baritone, and Louis Hurst was superb as Pasquale with excellent projection, a strong tone and he also brought a pathos to the title role, resulting in some sympathy for the poor Don, who is tricked and pays the price so badly through the prospect of romance. Though he did appear to find happiness with his devoted servant in the end (a character part excellently played by Madeline Robinson).

Lynton Atkinson, the artistic director of the company, conducted a perfectly formed chamber orchestra and accompanied the singers seamlessly throughout. The production, which brought out so much humour as well as romance, was directed by Joy Robinson. The quartet of young soloists (Daniel Gray Bell, Adam Brown, Olivia Carstairs and Madeline Robinson) who sang the



Adam Brown as the Notary and Thomas Chenhall as Malatesta

choruses deserve a mention for their beautiful ensemble and strong presence. The audience gasped at the reveal of the delightful fairy-lit Act III garden scene. Set design was by Michael Hart and costumes by Sue Grove. **ON**

★★★★★

Philip Blake-Jones



Miku Yasukawa as Norina and Chris Mosz as Ernesto in Don Pasquale