Hurn Court Opera, *Don Giovanni*.

Theatre Royal, Winchester. Thursday 11 April

Even lifelong opera-lovers can sometimes feel dispirited. Opera survives on the support and generosity and love of a generation born within 20 years of the war – but anyone looking around them in the stalls, or the grand tier, or the balcony or, frankly, even the amphitheatre of the Royal Opera House might be forgiven for wondering where the next generation is going to come from. Is it economics that is keeping out the young and even the middle-aged? Is it the repertoire? The ambience? Or, worse, is it that younger people just don’t like the music?

I hope not, though it is fashionable to denigrate, or just ignore, supposedly ‘elite’ forms of art. And sometimes opera really does not help itself, with its persistent black-tie conventions and champagne-swilling intervals. Country house opera, in particular, can make you feel as if you’re not really part of it unless you’ve dropped a quarter of a million in patronage and packed the right sort of picnic.

All of which partly explains why Hurn Court Opera’s performance of *Don Giovanni* was the most uplifting, inspiring and enjoyable night at the opera I’ve had in years. This was opera as it ought to be: a dedicated group of vastly talented singers – young singers – riding on the delight of an audience that was evidently as full of newbies as buffs, and was conspicuously short on the Bollinger-and-banking crowd.

I say it *partly* explains it. Chiefly what made it such a wonderful evening was the commitment, skill and palpable joy of the company. And the quality of the singing. Sam Young’s priapic, leather-and-eyeliner rock-star roué of a Don Giovanni dominated just as it should have done. Vocally assured, he handled the transitions from good-timer to apocalyptic-end-of-timer superbly, as well as the tricky way in which the role asks the performer to be both rapacious villain and, at moments, romantic lead. In the aria ‘Deh, vieni alla finestra’ you could almost feel that his feelings of love were real – or at least that Giovanni believed they were, at least for the duration of his own cleverly self-absorbed aria. The comic partnership with Samuel Lom’s delightfully sympathetic Leporello was particularly strong, too, reminding us that this is really an opera with two protagonists, even if only one is headlining.

These were two strong and confident vocal and comedic performances, and they anchored the whole. Lizzie Ryder’s Donna Anna and Daniel Gray Bell’s Don Ottavio brought the emotional depth. You felt that the grown-ups had arrived on stage every time they come on. Bell has a rare ease, right through the register, and such a graceful sense of line. Ryder sometimes reminded me of a postwar coloratura soprano, with an almost mezzo tint to her voice at times that made perfect sense of the casting; she brought the darkness. Her ‘Or sai chi l’onore’ was as electrifying as it should be, and Ottavio’s soaringly heartfelt ‘Dalla sua pace’ an exquisite response.

Hannah O’Brien’s Donna Elvira was powerful, nuanced and persuasive – the performance of a seasoned pro; I was astonished to discover that she is a recent alumna of the RNCM. The audience favourites, though, are both young singers indeed: Harrison Chéné-Gration (Masetto) and Tilly Goodwin (Zerlina) are allegedly third-year students at the Royal Academy of Music. These are character parts, and they made the most of them – Chéné-Gration’s flush-faced, confused young-bullock of a Masetto the perfect foil for Goodwin’s eyelash-batting, fausse-ingénue of a Zerlina. They showed how for the next generation of performers, the acting is as important as the singing; they also proved that the next generation has the right idea.

William Stevens’ Commendatore was poised, measured and just the right amount of menacing, and the chorus provided an astonishingly rich sound, especially given their numbers, and the acoustic. The orchestra, too, led by the artistic director Lynton Atkinson, felt like a much bigger band. They got a warmly appreciative, and richly deserved, clap.

This was a small and youthful production, and very occasionally I registered a flicker of inexperience in the shaping of an Italian consonant, or the handling of a prop, or the support for a coloratura passage. But I’ve seen international casts less assured than this, and definitely less committed.

The set and costume design (inevitably for a production where a seat in the stalls costs £28 and they pay the cast properly) was fairly minimal, but it felt coherent. And the concluding twist, as the chorus appears bearing placards painted with blood-red uplifted hands (or are they hands from hell?) and the words ‘Me Too’ / ‘Anche Io’ was both funny – the audience laughed – and sharply pointed. This is very much a ‘problem play’, or ‘problem opera’, and it only feels much more problematic these days. This was a clever way around the problem, and a thoughtful one too.

Hurn Court Opera’s strapline is ‘Supporting tomorrow’s vocal stars’. I think they’re doing more than that – they’re supporting tomorrow’s opera. Because this is how you do it: you collect a superb cast and you create a show that sends an entire theatre audience home fizzing and buzzing. And it doesn’t require champagne.

James McConnachie, 12 April 2024