

The Happy Prince

Queen's Park Junior Singers at Queen's Park Community School, London, November 21

Fairy tale is a serious business. One of the surprises of Malcolm Williamson's 1965 opera for children is the composer-librettist's refusal to sugar the pill of Oscar Wilde's exquisitely sad story: as the Prince sings, 'there is no Mystery so great as Misery'. His statue gives up the ruby in his sword-hilt, his sapphire eyes and his coat of gold leaf to ease the plight of the city folk, starving under the bleak, winter stars. The Swallow who helps him lingers too long before flying back to the warmth of Egypt, and freezes to death in the snow. The statue is melted down to a leaden heart, and the dead bird is dumped into the furnace. Only then does Williamson allow us the relief of a glowing apotheosis, as four Angels descend to announce, as in Wilde's original, that 'this leaden heart and this dead bird are the most precious things in the city'.

The impact of this hard-edged little fable is greater than we might expect from a piece lasting a mere 45 minutes, and it strikes all the more deeply for being performed by children—some here as young as seven. There's not a trace of condescension. For those of us progressing all too swiftly towards second childhood, it was good to see the juniors relishing the challenge of getting the work across. Not that the score is remotely po-faced. There's plenty of fun, not least in the super-heated, exuberant rhythms of the Swallow's Egyptian fantasies, adorned here by boldly painted masks and animal-heads. The scoring for two pianos and percussion is deliciously ear-tickling. But above all it is lyrical generosity that wins the day. The tunes come thick and fast, yet Williamson cunningly keeps the best until last, giving the Angels one of those trademark melting melodies that you can't get out of your head. Fifty years young, *The Happy Prince* comes over fresh as paint.

The 35-strong children's chorus was at the core of Freya Wynn-Jones's patterned production, which emphasized the opposites of heat and cold, riches and poverty, through fluid movement and stasis. The principals were more than adequate too. Tara Shutes was a graceful and sweetly sung Swallow, Owen Davies's (teenage tenor) Prince gentle in his broken-hearted idealism. The beneficiaries of his gems—Sophie Timms and Jibran Okorefe as a Seamstress and her sick son, Maxim Uys as a famished Author and Nancy Randle as a brazenly manic Match Girl—were equally effective, with Uys and Randle sharing the acting honours. Roger Bloomfield's (veteran baritone) Mayor was droll without overplaying the civic pomposity. All of them, like Michaela Bibby's pert Rich Girl, projected the text with clarity—especially commendable given the high, wide airiness of the hall.

In such a venture everything depends on the professionals. The musical director Mary Phillips understandably took a couple of choruses a fraction more slowly than ideal, but her choral preparation and vocal coaching proved inspirational throughout. Coordination between the singers and four instrumentalists—led by the eminent Australian pianist Antony Gray, who has recorded Williamson's complete piano music commercially—was seamless, despite the venue's spatial peculiarities. The best compliment I can pay the Queen's Park staging is that (dodgy lighting aside) one had to make very few allowances for either the performers' youth or the simplicity of the setting. *The Happy Prince* gave its cast and audience the real experience, direct and true. There were many more glamorous operatic events in London in 2014, but perhaps few more essential.

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