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Benjamin Britten: Paul Bunyan

In a 1960 BBC interview, Britten explained to Lord Harewood: ‘I was very much influenced by [W.H.] Auden …

He went to America, I think it was ‘38, early ‘39, and I went soon after. I think it wouldn’t be too much oversimplifying the situation to say that many of us young people at the time felt that Europe was more or less finished … I went to America and felt that I would make my future there.’ (Letters from a Life, vol.1, eds. Mitchell and Reed, p.619).

Premiered in May 1941 in the Brander Matthews Hall at Columbia University, Paul Bunyan — the ‘choral operetta’ that Britten and Auden created on the quintessentially American theme of the legend of the eponymous pioneering lumberjack — might be seen as a naïve attempt to beguile: an offering intended to confirm their artistic credentials for American citizenship. But it also hinted at the challenges ahead for a nation built upon a Dream, as its people learn that they must balance individual choice with the need to tolerate ‘difference’ and protect the ‘outsider’.

It is a challenge to make something coherent of a work which offers both an uplifting parable and symbolic inferences; both light-hearted Broadway gags and more biting Thirties’ socialism. Britten’s score is an appealing medley of deft pastiches — blues quartet, country and western ballad, jazz lament, Gilbert and Sullivan comedy — each idiom following the next in quick succession, with the odd extravagant Donizettian-duet thrown into the mix; but the narrative thread is rather weak and the allegory at times ambiguous.

For this ETO production, director Liam Steel and set/costume designer Anna Fleischle opted to keep things fairly simple, housing all the action in an orthodox Loggers’ Cabin, and moving swiftly between the multifarious numbers in the manner of a slick Broadway musical. Even the Western Union Boy (tenor Matt R. J. Ward) was keen to get into the act, excitedly executing a polished table-top routine that would not have shamed Fred Astaire.

Singing the limpid, swinging motif that is one of the few uniting elements of the score, the unison chorus seemed a little slow to get going; but maybe this is the point — for the soporific way of life of the ‘Old Trees’ (represented by tall timbers of wood), before man’s arrival on earth, is overturned in this opening ensemble by the ambition and energy of the impatient ‘Young Trees’ (shorter burgeoning planks). In full voice by the end of the number, the ETO chorus was impressively resonant, foreshadowing an even more resplendent pinnacle, ‘O great day of discovery’, in Act 2.

Steel has decided to capitalise upon the fact that, while there is not much of a narrative thread, there are lots of terrific individual musical numbers in which Britten shows off his prowess as a master of pastiche and parody. The choreography was slick, particularly given the limits of the stage space; this is a genuine ‘company’ work, with the soloists coming forth from the chorus, and the ensemble numbers were the highpoint. Especially notable were the lumberjacks’ chorus in Act 1 in Act 1 — which utilised many a hackneyed Broadway gag to cheerful effect — the Quartet of Swedes, and the loggers’ hyperbolic, competitive rivalry for Tiny’s attention.

One of the challenges for a director is how to present the oversized eponymous hero who never actually appears on stage. Paul Bunyan is less a ‘character’ than an embodiment of man’s glorious spirit of conquest; but he is a static element in the drama and presents difficulties with regard to the integration of his projected, disembodied voice with the drama seen on stage. Steel had an ingenuous solution: as the tale of his birth and life was told by the collective gathering, Bunyan’s growth — from ‘six inches’, he gained ‘346 pounds every week’ and ‘grew so fast, by the time he was eight/ He was at tall as the Empire State’ — was illustrated by the ascending top hat of Uncle Sam which, bedecked with red and blue band, was lifted ever higher by successive members of the company, a metaphor for Bunyan and a personification of the emergent nation. Subsequently, the awe-struck loggers addressed their champion with gazes striving upwards, a rickety ladder adorned with a bedraggled Star-Spangled Banner pointing to a distant pinnacle of aspiration. Bunyan’s words were intoned sonorously but without sententiousness by Damian Lewis.

Tenor Mark Wilde skilfully conveyed the reflective introspection of Johnny Inkslinger, the brooding ‘book keeper’, using a tender voice and expressive nuance most sensitively. In his big Act 1 number, ‘Inkslinger’s Song’, in which the troubled outsider reflects on the irreconcilable gap between the simplicity of nature and the complexity of human culture, Wilde’s tone and projection grew in a controlled fashion as the melody expanded from recitative-like declamation to arioso outpouring. Although he was at times a little pushed at the top, Wilde created a convincingly rounded character, a man capable of complexity of feeling. Seated on a bunk, alone in the cabin, in Inkslinger’s ‘Regret’, his despair in the face of the conflict between hope and misfortune was poignant in its simplicity of articulation.

Elsewhere there was indulgent exuberance. Crooning an Italianate ‘Cooks’ duet’, bass Piotr Lempa (Ben Benny) and tenor Stuart Haycock (Sam Sharkey) were deliciously camp. They made sure that we were aware that Auden’s slick satire on vulgarity of an advertising culture which plays upon our insecurities — ‘The Best People are crazy about soups! … Beans are all the rage among the Higher Income Groups!’ — is just as apt now as in the 1930s.

The animal roles, cast for female voices, provide a welcome complement to the rugged male voices that predominate, and Abigail Kelly, as the dog Fido, and Amy J. Payne and Emma Watkinson, as the felines Moppet and Poppet, were both alluring of voice and edgy of character: when feisty Fido joined the courtesan cats in a piquant denouncement of social ills in the Act 2 ‘Litany’, their appeal ‘Save animals and men’, made an impact. As the loafer-flapping Geese, a form of life half-way between the trees and mankind, Lorna Bridge, Annabel Mountford and Hannah Sawle also sang with vocal precision and dramatic impact.

Many of these characters in this nascent nature are not only searching for their future paths but also for their inner selves. Tenor Ashley Catling revealed a thoughtfulness hidden by the logger’s brawn in Slim’s Song, as he lamented, ‘I must hunt my shadow/ And the self I lack’. Baritone Wyn Pencarreg was splendid as the bewildered foreman Hel Helson, a dull dunderhead who is bewildered by life’s turns and tribulations. Pencarreg blindly blustered in ‘The Mocking of Hel Helson’, brutally asserting ‘versions’ of his self — ‘Helson the Brave, the Fair, the Wise …’ — but also winning our sympathy.

Helsons’s violent, futile assault on Bunyan is juxtaposed with the love duet of Slim and Tiny, the latter role sung with sweet clarity and warmth by mezzo soprano Caryl Hughes. Steel placed the frolicking lovers and the felled logger on top and lower bunk respectively, surrounded by a chorus by turns mournful then scornful — a delightful comic juxtaposition.

One detail which failed to convince was the sharing of the Narrator’s ballads between Inkslinger and the company. It’s true that by allowing the members of the collective to take successive lines of the guitar-accompanied ballads, Steel allowed them to tell their own tale; but, the balladeer can lend a useful ironic distance and serve as narrative link between the essentially stand-alone numbers. And, Inkslinger himself is at one remove from the collective, a man of words and thoughts, reflecting on his actions and motives, achievements and future paths, much like Auden himself at this time; he is decidedly not one of the herd.

In the rather dry acoustic of the Linbury Studio Theatre, Britten’s economical woodwind-based orchestration provided a fitting commentary on the vocal numbers; this was especially so in Inskslinger’s numbers. The ETO orchestra was placed behind the back wall of the cabin, but the woodwind pierced through crisp and clear, although some of the string resonance was sacrificed. Conductor Philip Sunderland kept things moving along with many a well-judged tempo: the jazz-inspired ‘Quartet of the Defeated’ was aptly funereal.

There are dark undertones in this operetta, though: ‘Inkslinger’s Song’ concludes with an outpouring of the social conscience of the 1930s: ‘Oh, but where are the beautiful places/ Where what you begin you complete,/ Where the joy shine out of men’ faces,/ And all get sufficient to eat?’. For all its virtues, Steel’s rather homespun reading didn’t always capture this aspect. Indeed, Paul Bunyan’s ‘Goodnight’ which closes Act 1 (a passage which was added by Britten during revisions to the score in 1974) put me in mind of the 1970s television show The Waltons — as darkness fell and the lapping dog quietened, I half expected to hear ‘G’night John-Boy’ echoing from the loggers’ bunks!

One of the side-effects of the almost relentlessly up-beat feeling was that moments of stillness and import did not always make their full impact. One of the most powerful musico-dramatic moments comes in the opening scene when ‘the whole pattern of life is altered’ and ‘the moon turns blue’: the logger who enthusiastically slapped blue paint on the cog-wheel perched high up the cabin wall raised a wry titter, but I’m not sure that this really captured the romance of Britten’s ethereal ‘gamelan’ colours and harmonies.

‘Similarly, at the end, Bunyan’s final words to the emergent nation were somewhat lost, as the party-goers began clearing up the debris of the celebration. Perhaps Steel was making a subtle point: Bunyan says, ‘America is what you do/ America is I and you, /America is what you choose to make it’, but these Americans did not listen and fail to recognise their responsibilities, individual and collective. In the closing moments, Steel attempted to add some political depth to the production. If the action had already suggested that the American Dream was flawed at the start, then the future certainly did not look good for these loggers, judging by the contents of the wicker basket left by Bunyan for the loggers, like a prophesy to be resignedly accepted or actively resisted. Bent intently, and to the incredulity of the onlookers, Inkslinger withdrew first a pistol, then a lurid Guantanamo jumpsuit, followed by an overly large Bible (presaging the influence of the Christian Right?), a shabby copy of Playboy, some fast food wrappers, a lap-top, a periwig and noose. This chain of emblems of the institutions of state and finance spoke powerfully. The final image of black soprano Abigail Kelly, draped with a crumpled Stars and Stripes, was a poignant one.’ Claire Seymour