The Pirates of Penzance

Gilbert & Sullivan

The Gilbert & Sullivan Opera Company at the Buxton G&S Festival

Buxton Opera House

27 July 2013 to 04 August 2013

IT’S the 20th Gilbert & Sullivan Festival at Buxton and possibly the last time we’ll see them all. Next year they’re moving the whole kit and caboodle to Harrogate, as well as touring the Gilbert & Sullivan Opera Company around the country, for the first time, in the spring and early summer before the festival.

So this year’s shows are ones to be savoured. And John Savournin’s take on The Pirates of Penzance, with himself as the Pirate King, is a fresh and lively one, with youth taking a strong share of the principal roles. I saw the first, matinee, performance – preceded by Sullivan’s B flat National Anthem (to start the whole festival properly) from the small but better-than-ever sounding National Festival Orchestra, and though there were a few details that were no doubt smoothed out the next time, it was all enormous fun.

Savournin borrowed a few ideas from the recent Scottish Opera presentation – as well as inheriting operatic tenor Nicholas Sharratt as Frederic – and brought three female principals from the recent Charles Court Opera miniature version (in which he also directed and sang). It was an all-dancing production, with some witty and entertaining choreography, credited to both the director and Cecilia Darker, and included many inventive touches … opening the opera as a celebration feast for Frederic was one, and the strange furry animals that inhabited the policemen’s camouflaging forestry later on were another: daft, but somehow all in keeping with Gilbert's world.Richard Gauntlett, stalwart of Opera della Luna and man of many parts (including a great Jack Point at Buxton two years ago), was a rapid-fire exponent of Major-General Stanley (catching even the excellent co-ordinatory gifts of conductor Andrew Nicklin – who seems to be the festival’s main conductor this year – out here and there. Nicholas Sharratt was every bit as good as expected, and Bruce Graham his familiar imposing self as the Sergeant of Police. The only disappointment was from Louis Dall’Ava, as Samuel, who seemed to have trouble holding his intonation.

The girls included some exceptionally good performers. Alexandra Hutton – Mabel – is a young Australian coloratura soprano (recently seen and heard in the centenary Aldeburgh Festival) of great comedic and musical quality. Amy J Payne and Nichola Jolley are likewise actresses who revel in affectionate send-up of their characters (Edith and Kate). And the chorus sang sweetly and strongly.

Reviewer: Robert Beale