

## Loose Ends



Dmitri Shostakovich: *The Nose*, Met Encore in HD, Phoenix Picturehouse, Oxford, 29 October. . Robert Saxton (b 1953): Clare Hammond, piano,

Holywell Music Room, 12 November. Gaetano Donizetti: *Valentina* Ceschi *L'Elisir d'Amore*, OperaUpClose, The North Wall, Oxford, 15 November 2013

This last contribution of a busy Michaelmas Term contains three brief reviews, of the second Met in HD of the season, Shostakovich's strange opera *The Nose*, a piano recital by Clare Hammond as part of the Music Faculty's celebration of Robert Saxton's sixtieth birthday and the latest visit of the enterprising company OperaUpClose in a Hollywood update of Donizetti. *L'Elisir d'Amore*.

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SHOSTAKOVICH's opera *The Nose* was first performed in 1930 when the composer was twenty-four years old. Based on Gogol's short story satirising the philistinism and officialdom of society in general. Updated to the early Soviet era, it survived sixteen performances before Stalin's clampdown on the arts and was revived in Moscow in 1974, in a chamber production after the score had been rediscovered in the basement of the Bolshoi Theatre in the 1950s. This somewhat unlikely addition to The Met's repertoire is a co-production with Festival d'Aix en Provence and Opéra de Lyon both known for highly imaginative interpretations. This is its thirteenth appearance at The Met since the first in 2010.

The plot concerns the adventures of the nose of a functionary Kovalyov who wakes up one morning to find that the nose has become detached and taken on a life of its own, enlarged to person-size. The opera follows satirically the various personal, social and business interactions of its owner until eventually Kovalyov wakes up with the nose restored.

This bizarre and apparently absurd surrealist plot somehow sustains a three hour opera in three acts and seventeen scenes with a cast of seventy. It is constantly entertaining, yet with passages in which it was impossible not to nod off. One awoke without feeling one had missed anything. The production and design by William Kentridge set it in its time—the jazz-age, with costumes and scenery reminding of the French avant-garde abstract cinematic style of the twenties. The score was captivatingly delivered by the conductor Pavel Smelkov. This was, on the whole, a unique and entertaining operatic experience.

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On 11&12 November the Faculty of Music marked the sixtieth birthday of

Robert Saxton, since 1999 Professor of Composition and Tutorial Fellow of Worcester. A prolific composer of works written for many well-known ensembles, his song-cycle *Time and the Seasons* was commissioned by Oxford-Lieder and received its first performance to great acclaim at the recent Lieder Festival. The event comprised two concerts, 'in conversation' and a research colloquium. The Monday concert of Saxton's music was given by Ensemble Isis, the other a piano recital by brilliant young pianist Clare Hammond, rapidly making her name as a virtuoso player.

The piano recital opened with Saxton's latest composition *Hortus Musicae* completed this year, receiving its first performance on 24 June at the London Festival played by the same pianist. It is a large work in five movements representing various metaphysical aspects of 'the garden'—a sort of Anglicised Messiaen. Like that composer, the work makes tremendous demands on the performer. For me it was a complete revelation both of composer and of performer. The form is a sequence of short, impulsive detached notes interwoven with complex passages representing the mood of each movement. Hammond played faultlessly with the utmost clarity of execution—a breath-taking performance. She brought the same qualities to the rest of her programme—21 year old Benjamin Britten's *Holiday Diary* (Britten's influence as an early mentor of Saxton is apparent), then Saxton's *Chacony* for left hand, leading directly into Brahms' transcription for piano left-hand of the Bach D minor *Chaconne*. The last, an interesting exercise, does not stand comparison in incisiveness with Busoni's two handed version. At least the page turning was easier for a two-handed pianist.

We look forward both to hearing more of Saxton's music and to Hammond's next visit to Oxford to hear her in a more varied repertoire.

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OperaUpClose was in Summertown again in November with another of their imaginative transpositions. Following *La Bohème* in London bed-sit land and *The Barber of Seville* in Jane Austen's England, this time we had Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* set by a Hollywood poolside. The new version was conceived by Valentina Ceschi to a libretto by Thomas Eccleshare with music re-orchestrated for Piano (David Gostick), Viola (Frances Higgs) and Clarinet (Ellie McMurray). This production opened at the King's Head Theatre in February in the adapted Tavern, now their permanent home.

Nemorino, gardener, poolboy and unrecognised script writer (Philip Lee) is in love with his employer, Adina, a Hollywood star (Prudence Sanders). Inspired by the production of a film about Tristan and Isolde, Nemorino dreams of finding a love potion which will unite him

with Adina. Belcore (Christopher Jacklin), a retiring army sergeant with political ambitions, has become engaged to Adina who is in no hurry to marry. Dulcamara (Alistair Sutherland) a stylist arrives with his lotions and ointments and a new cocktail elixir purchased by Nemorino. Gianetta (Caroline Kennedy, a fellow actress, gets wind that Nemorino's scripts have been purchased by a company for an astronomical sum and spreads the rumour causing all the girls to flock around him arousing Adina's jealousy. All is revealed and Adina and Nemorino are united.

This is a modern take on the original with a running time less than two hours which is hugely successful, providing a delightful evening's entertainment. An ingenious set with a flower decked entrance and an upended swimming pool so we look down on the floating mattresses. The musical arrangement fits perfectly the three instruments. Don't expect great singing from this cast. It suffices that they sing in tune and convey the words.

The next visit of OperaUpClose to Oxford will be on 21 February 2014 with their new version of *La Traviata*. We can't wait!

PETER SCHOFIELD