

France's festival of Britten



Michael Slattery as the Madwoman in 'Curlew River'

The Opéra de Lyon is in the middle of a [Benjamin Britten](#) blitz. A poster emblazoned across the façade of the company's home in Place de la Comédie proclaims him as "one of the greatest composers of today" – a surprisingly upbeat French assessment of a Brit who has been dead for nearly 40 years.

Beneath a royal crown motif, another poster advises passers-by to "keep calm and listen to Britten". All this may be good PR, but keeping calm when listening to Britten has never been an option. And although the English stiff upper lip is a useful caricature, the "keep calm" catchphrase has a deeper inference – the troubled and threatening substance beneath the well-bred surface of Britten's aesthetic.

In the aftermath of the composer's highly successful centenary last year, it is good to find his music continuing to resonate far and wide – and not just his best-known works. As well as a new *Peter Grimes*, Lyon mounted *The Turn of the Screw* (unstaged in the UK last year) and revived an existing production of *Curlew River*: all three were enthusiastically received at sold-out performances.

Britten is hardly a rarity in these parts: over the years I have "scalped" performances of all his operas in francophone Europe, including a French-language *Albert Herring* that intriguingly reverted to the Maupassant origins of the tale.

None of this month's performances in Lyon takes such liberties. There were high hopes for *Grimes*, because it reunited Japanese director Yoshi Oida with British tenor Alan Oke, the partnership that created Aldeburgh's mesmerising *Death in Venice* in 2007. *The Turn of the Screw* was always going to be the least predictable, partly due to Argentine director Valentina Carrasco's inexperience in opera. As for *Curlew River*, Olivier Py's production was a known quantity: it was the highlight of the Opéra de Lyon's visit to the 2007 Edinburgh Festival.

In the end, despite a mature reading of the score from his compatriot, the conductor Kazushi Ono, Oida's *Grimes* disappointed. There were no glaring sins of commission but his surprisingly unfocused staging never penetrated the heart of the setting. Richard Hudson's traditional costumes looked odd in the context of Tom Schenk's metallic yet amorphous set, and the characters had a one-size-fits-all look. Rosalind Plowright's Mrs Sedley alone stood out, an amalgam of matriarchal Lady Billows

(*Herring*) and post-menopausal Governess (*Screw*). Given the straitjacketed appearance of Michaela Kaune's Ellen and Andrew Foster-Williams's Balstrode, it says much for Oke (hero of Aldeburgh's award-winning *Grimes on the Beach*) that he gave such a gritty account of the title role – not so much traditional misfit as autistic loner.

The Turn of the Screw, designed by Carles Berga and Nidia Tusal, and ravishingly lit by Peter Van Praet, had an elaborate veneer: video footage of country house life, a seductive orangery, a complex web of pulleys to scoop period furniture into mid-air. Admirable though it all looked, it was uninvolved. There was no sense of dramatic trajectory towards a catastrophic climax, nor a shred of mystery. It was left to Ono's orchestra to supply the enchantment.

Nevertheless, the idea of representing Flora and Miles as white-haired twins was inspired: both were sung by teenage members of the Opéra's enterprising youth programme (which also supplied the boy in *Curlew River* and the apprentice in *Grimes*). In age and voice, Katharine Goeldner's trouser-suited Mrs Grose was insufficiently differentiated from Heather Newhouse's anodyne Governess, while Andrew Tortise and Giselle Allen struggled to make an impact as the ghosts.

And what of *Curlew River*? The first of Britten's *Church Parables* was one of the big works whose standing rose during last year's centenary, but it has never been a favourite with regular opera houses, always making its impact in a festival context. Well, Lyon combined the two, and this very un-English but irresistibly moving story of monks and a Madwoman – inspired by the Noh plays that Britten saw on a visit to Japan in 1956 – came up trumps.

Britten's bewitchingly small instrumental ensemble was placed on a platform high above a severe, all-black set. The work's economy forces directors to show their colours, and Olivier Py responds with an austere, ritualistic conception, tautly directed but pungently expressive, that makes the transcendent finale all the more touching.

No masks, no extraneous activity, but a masterful transformation of monk into Madwoman at a make-up desk side-stage, her blood-red face framed by long black locks. Michael Slattery, assisted by William Dazeley's trenchant Ferryman, gave a riveting performance that gradually uncovered a parent's broken heart as the mime of child abuse and death was enacted.

Britten, a homosexual at a time when that was still transgressive, yearned for a family of his own. What this performance seemed to suggest is that he identified with parental feelings and understood the intensity of unconditional love. Barely 75 minutes in duration, *Curlew River* made a powerful centrepiece to Lyon's festival triptych.

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