

Sinister Minister brings New Hope to Highgate

Hampstead Garden Opera's last production at Upstairs at the Gatehouse in Highgate was Susannah, by the American Carlisle Floyd. Susannah was written after a friend suggested basing an opera on the tale of Susannah and the elders. The friend intended to write the libretto but did not do so. The composer wrote the book himself. The first performance was in 1955, at Florida State University, where Floyd was a member of the faculty of music. Its first performance in Europe was in Brussels, in 1958. It has become one of the most performed works in the American operatic repertory, some think the most performed. HGO's production was, however, only the third in the UK.

Floyd set the updated story in Tennessee, in the remote New Hope Valley. During a square dance, Susannah, an orphan brought up by her alcoholic brother, Sam, attracts much male attention, and corresponding disapproval from jealous wives of the local church elders. The guest preacher at revival meetings to be held subsequently, the Reverend Olin Blich, arrives. He is clearly also taken with Susannah but is warned by Mr Mclean, a leading elder, and his wife, whose views are further coloured by their son Bat's attraction to Susannah, that her character is dubious. Next morning, seeking a place for baptism, the elders and Blich espy Susannah bathing in a creek. Unaware that this has been taken as further evidence of an immorality of which she is anyway innocent, Susannah later brings some food to a community picnic. She is shocked by the accusation against her. Later, pressed at a revival meeting to confess, but knowing herself to be fault-free, she flees home, more upset. Blich follows. They argue until both are exhausted. Blich contrives to gain Susannah's sympathy. He spends the night at her house, her brother being away hunting. Next day, Blich seeks to expunge feelings of guilt at his seduction of Susannah by trying to persuade the elders of her innocence. They remain unconvinced. Blich seeks forgiveness from Susannah. She refuses it. On his return from hunting she tells her brother, Sam, of events in his absence. At the baptism by the creek he shoots Blich dead. He escapes pursuit by the outraged congregation, which then confronts Susannah at home. She defies them, ultimately with a gun. They retreat, leaving only Bat, the McLean's son, who, through his feelings for Susannah, had come to warn of the congregation's arrival. He finally leaves too. Susannah remains, solitary and defiant.

Much sound and fury, signifying a great deal, is therefore packed into this fairly short musical drama, as the composer described it. HGO's principals and chorus did it full justice on the first night. Claire McKenna, as Susannah, and Gabriel Gottlieb, as the sinister minister, shone particularly in the leading roles. Ben Francis as Susannah's brother, and Zachary Roberts, as Bat McLean, were also exemplary. Using a reduced orchestration by the composer, The Dionysius Ensemble, under its Music Director, Oliver-John Ruthven, gave a stirring account of the impressive and intriguing score. Producer and Director Sinéad O'Neill had marshalled her resources with great adroitness, around the simple but effective set designed by Sarah Bacon.

It was a brave decision by HGO to present this very dark but musically and dramatically fascinating piece, likely to be unknown to most of its potential audience. From talking to other members of the first night's full house, not everyone was wholly captivated. Let's hope they nevertheless acknowledged the achievement on the part of all members of HGO it undoubtedly represented. Let's hope also that subsequent houses were satisfactory, and adequately appreciative of the great merit of what they heard and saw.

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