

## HGO'S RISKY MOVE PAYS OFF

### **HUGH THE DROVER Hampstead Garden Opera Upstairs at the Gatehouse Highgate**

***Michael White – Ham & High December 15 2011***

Though I'm devoted to Vaughan Williams, I don't pretend that opera was his greatest strength and have always assumed from recordings (never having seen it on stage) that his little performed Hugh the Drover was crudely unworkable. At best a piece of period (1920s) charm.

But this straightforward Hampstead Garden Opera production at the Gatehouse in Highgate, proved that creakiness is not insuperable and that the piece has far more than the shallow sentiments and rumty-tumty tunes it first suggests.

With an amateur chorus that outclassed anything you'd dare expect from amateurs, and fine young student-level principals, it held together brilliantly. And there was purpose in the seriously capable conducting of Oliver-John Ruthven who had made his own, adept reduction of the score for a small band of a dozen players, rousing them to blazing strength.

Discoveries like this cheer up a critic's life no end and that a little company like HGO is prepared to take the risk they entail – instead of churning out another Traviata, Butterfly or other standard that will guarantee an audience – deserves some flag-waving. I've seen it do good things of old. But never quite so good, or valuable, as this.