

## Hugh the Drover

*Hampstead Garden Opera at the Gatehouse, London N6, November 17*

The upstairs room at the Gatehouse pub in Highgate was an apt venue for Hampstead Garden Opera to stage Vaughan Williams's ballad opera: its own history, stretching back over three and a half centuries, encompasses that of the work, and the warm glow of its downstairs bar was well fitted to draw in an audience for this touching romance. The production, by Angela Hardcastle, was particularly strong on the anti-French feeling prevailing in England at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, when spies were believed to be lurking round every corner and the inhabitants of a small Cotswold market town would have been all too ready to turn on a stranger in their midst. A painted backcloth running the length of the room faced the audience, depicting the high street where the HGO chorus, in vibrant voice, personified the townspeople. Celebrating the May Fair, they were dressed in their best (set and costumes were by Charlie Tymms), eager to sample the wares of various peddlers, and noisily responsive to the Showman wielding an effigy of 'Napoleon Bonyparty'. As they swept off after a troupe of Morris dancers, leaving behind Mary and her Aunt Jane, a stranger, Hugh, sung by David de Winter, appeared and launched into his persuasive air about life on the road. Delivered with passion and honest intent, it won the heart of Mary, eager for an escape from marriage to the butcher John as planned by her domineering father. Mary was winningly sung by Elaine Tate in a clear soprano, expressive of the courage she must summon to overcome the community's hostility.

Hugh's victory in his disturbingly vivid bare-knuckle fight with John brings a trumped-up accusation of spying; locked in the stocks awaiting execution the next day, de Winter's delivery of Hugh's solo about his Mary confirmed his ability to round out a character through the music. The lovers' fortunes were transformed with the arrival of a military sergeant, forcefully sung by Barnaby Beer, who identified his friend Hugh as a collector of Welsh ponies for the British Army and a true patriot—and hauled John off for military conscription. The three frustrated villains were characterized with relish and unremitting nastiness by Ed Ballard, Ian Helm and Nick Whitfield. Camilla Bull contributed a sympathetic cameo as Aunt Jane.

The conductor Oliver-John Ruthven had made the orchestral reduction for five strings, four winds, three brass and a piano, whose well-nourished sound did justice to VW's score in the small theatre, packed with an appreciative audience of just over 100.

MARGARET DAVIES

