

The Buzz – Highgate Society Magazine – 5th July 2013

Total Work of Art

Few performances over my many years of theatre-going have been so rewarding as Hampstead Garden Opera's recent Upstairs at the Gatehouse production of Jonathan Dove's *Mansfield Park*.

The 1814 first edition of Jane Austen's third novel sold out within six months, early testimony to the power her story continues to exert. The composer and his librettist Alasdair Middleton have transmuted the novel into operatic gold, to which Hampstead Garden Opera's production gave exceptional polish.

Production Director Bruno Ravella has worked with the company before, creating enjoyably inventive productions of *The Elixir of Love* and *The Clemency of Titus*. His *Mansfield Park*, like these others, was commendably free from the distractions some contemporary directors now feel they must introduce. Holly Seager's sets and costumes and Andrew May's lighting complemented Ravella's concept admirably. They immediately facilitated entry of the audience into the world of Fanny Price and the Bertrams.

Oliver-John Ruthven as Musical Director conducted Yau Cheng and Lana Bode, impeccably playing the piano that formed part of the set, with characteristic involvement and insight. His rapport with the cast was similarly productive. The voices and musicality of the singers of the principal roles (Dominic Sedgwick (Edmund Bertram), Eleanor Minney (Fanny Price), Phillippa Murray (Mary Crawford), Tom Dupernex (Henry Crawford), Charlotte Richardson (Maria Bertram), Emily Phillips (Julia Bertram), Madeleine Bradbury Rance (Mrs Norris), William Davies (Mr Rushworth), David Danson (Sir Thomas Bertram) and Michelle Jueno (Lady Bertram)) were consistently impressive. Their acting was also striking, not only individually but as an ensemble. Their relish for their roles, the relationships between them, and the music communicated itself from the outset to the capacity audience.

As Charlotte Bronte might have said, 'Reader, I liked it'. From their reactions so did the audience. But what factors combined to make this performance, this production and this work so exceptional? Before the performance began the set immediately conveyed the novel's world. The piano duo taking their places brought enhanced engagement. The successive imaginatively lit stage pictures strengthened involvement. As the action proceeded it was intriguing to note how the music mirrored British speech patterns, as Janacek's music reflects those in Czech. As the work ended I felt the essence of everything had been the commonality between the music and the tale. I even sensed parallels with Wagner's everyday story of Rhineland folk in *The Ring!* Fascinating, then, to discover later that the composer has written an 18-player, two-evening adaptation of the latter, and to learn from his programme note that on first reading the novel he had 'heard music'. The Production Director writes in the programme that 'charmed by the witty libretto and expressive music' on first contact with them he had 'rarely felt so inspired by a piece'. Much to ponder and reflect on, therefore, but after doing so I feel no need to alter my immediate conclusion as the opera ended: 'A major performance of a major work'.