

A Very Joyful Production

Benjamin Britten's 'Albert Herring' at Hampstead Garden Opera impresses ALICE McVEIGH

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Hampstead Garden Opera — unknown to me until now — is a little gem of a company in north London, and Britten's *Albert Herring* was a perfect vehicle for it. [Saturday 22 November 2014, matinée performance]

This is of course Britten's only comic opera (though its underlying darker notes were also given full rein under the stunningly inventive direction of Joe Austin), with a masterful deployment of a chamber orchestra (conducted with striking sensitivity to both singers and score by Oliver-John Ruthven). Of course, everything has to be economical in a space as intimate as 'Upstairs at the Gatehouse' — sets especially — but what it lost in glamour was more than compensated for by the calibre of the talent on offer, and the ingenuity with which that space was used.

Austin's programme notes explained how he hoped to explore beyond the stereotypical archetypes to the sense that the characters were taking on the roles society presumed to expect of them. There was indeed an almost a Peter Grimesian quality to society's 'ganging up' on *Albert Herring* after his reappearance, and both Nancy and Mrs Herring were encouraged to display some real development, yet Austin's finger never quite left the comic pulse, and the vicar's tea party/Wildeian/P G Wodehousian structure remained intact.

The star, as it had to be, was William Johnston Davies as *Albert Herring*, who progressed from a callow gawky shop-assistant into a self-assured, fully awakened grown-up with the assistance of a voice burnished from top to bottom (and capable of the most focussed pianissimo as well as a powerful charge) combined with a impeccably-judged acting ability. (His wonder and jealousy while Sid was courting Nancy was masterly, as was the insouciance of his return from the 'dead'.)

Also startlingly good were John Stainsby (Sid), a voice of raw power combined with finesse and the golden-toned, golden-headed Beth Moxon (Nancy), who grew with her role almost as much as Davies did in his. Caroline Kennedy was a crystalline-voiced, witty delight as Miss Wordsworth — her very walk was imbued with her characterisation — while Heather Glansford Rowson contrived to make the grasping, bullying, almost hysterically loving Mrs Herring almost empathetic, so powerful was her presence in the last act: she possesses class and resonance in both mezzo and soprano ranges.

Simone Sauphanor displayed sterling vocal projection if rather less character as Lady Billows — could have done with more of a touch of the Lady Bracknells — while the reverse was rather the case with Annette Dumville, William Bouvel and Michael Pandazis, all of whom embodied their roles. Shaun Aquilina (as the Reverend Mr Gedge) combined a limpid, almost Schubertian beauty of tone with good comic timing. Perhaps the greatest joy (of a very joyful production) was the sense of the cast as

an ensemble, perfectly knitted together, hugely supportive of one another, using Austin's notions and Britten's pacing to the hilt.

The shame is that I can't recommend this production with any éclat, as its run ends as I write and was anyway good as sold-out. Isn't there a larger theatre where this delightful company could exhibit — one where the orchestra wouldn't need to take up a third of the stage, where the seats might be comfier, and where such voices might have the chance to fill a serious-sized hall? On this showing, they are certainly worthy of it.

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