

PUNCHY OPERA - AND ALL ON A PUB STAGE

The best discovery so far of my time as music critic on this newspaper is Hampstead Garden Opera - a small, largely amateur company but assured, competent and ambitious.

And its ambitions the other week spread to a modern American opera that has become a kind of classic over there but not here.

Called *Susannah*, it's a take on the Biblical story of Susanna and the Elders, in which a young woman, bathing naked, is spied on by a bunch of old men who then camouflage their lust for her by calling her a slut.

For the composer Carlisle Floyd who wrote it in 1955, it becomes a parable of hypocrisy and injustice during the McCarthy era.

But it also reads like an American response to Britten's *Peter Grimes* which premiered 10 years earlier and had become totemic - a role model for all that modern, English-language opera could achieve.

Floyd's *Susannah* is a free-spirited girl in backwoods America who becomes a social outcast. Just like *Peter Grimes*, she stands almost alone against a small community, misunderstood, hounded and very nearly lynched.

The difference, however, is that where *Grimes* yields to the pressure and drowns himself, *Susannah* stares it out, defiantly.

She sees the mob off with a gun, and, as the opera closes, she's alone, facing a problematic future but uncompromised.

It's a compactly powerful piece. And being melodic, it's an easy listen - with the open-hearted lyricism of so many American operas from the mid/late 20th century that would please crowds on this side of the Atlantic if only British companies took them up. I never understand why they don't.

Anyway, where ENO, Opera North et al fear to tread, HGO has boldly gone - and very creditably.

From the cast I saw (there were two), the supporting roles were well-taken, with a lovely young, clear-voiced but warm soprano, Helen Bailey, in the lead.

The chorus moved awkwardly but sang with strength and coherence.

The stage direction (Sinead O'Neill) was punchy and the small, 13-piece orchestra (purposefully conducted by Oliver- John Ruthven) impressive.

And all of it in a room above a pub in Highgate. I stand amazed.

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