

Fortune Favours the Brave

Dexter Drown reports on an ambitious community project in Birmingham

Der fliegende Holländer. Byron Jackson (Dutchman), Mari Wyn Williams (Senta), Gerrit Paul Groen (Daland), Anando Mukerjee (Erik), Laura Woods (Mary), Christian Joel (Steersman); Birmingham Choral Union, Central England Camerata/Jack Ridley; Iqbal Khan (director). Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, 10 July 2024

Persona Arts' production of *Der fliegende Holländer* at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire set out to be different. First, eschewing traditional all-black attire, the musicians of the Central England Camerata and their leader Anna Downes were clad in an array of beige, tan and sandy brown linen shirts, evoking the image of a band of sailors. The lack of a traditional set did not detract from the audience's experience; on the contrary, the production cleverly made the most of the natural features of the Bradshaw Hall. The room's wooden acoustic panelling evoked the deck of a ship, while lighting bars were lowered to suggest the yards of a sailing vessel.

The evening began with a striking prelude: *Mami Wata*, composed by Birmingham-based artist Bobbie-Jane Gardner. Commissioned by Persona Arts specifically for this run, the piece was performed by the junior choristers of St Mary's Church, Handsworth. Gardner's composition served as an imaginative and fitting prologue to Wagner's tale, framing the legend of the Dutchman as a story passed down through generations. Its narrative centres around visits to a grandmother who warns of a mysterious creature by the rocks. Gardner's work, inspired by the water goddess of the African Voudun religion, pays clear homage to Wagner's orchestral style, with swirling music for the strings, and provided an effective psychological context for the evening's main event.

When conductor Jack Ridley led the orchestra into Wagner's score, there was a palpable shift in energy, and lift in the quality of playing. The opening storm was vividly brought to life by the orchestra's lower brass, who unleashed a tempestuous sound that aptly captured the fury of Wagner's sea. However, their intensity occasionally overwhelmed the orchestra, and balance continued to be an issue throughout the evening; the strings, particularly the three [*sic*] brave violas, sometimes struggled to assert themselves against the brass and wind.

The male chorus of the Birmingham Choral Union, on the other hand, made a strong impact, bustling onto the stage with great gusto – this group, many of whom had never been involved in opera before, could teach many a professional chorister a thing or two about acting.

Gerrit Paul Groen, as Daland, delivered one of the evening's most memorable vocal performances, rich and resonant across his range, perfectly suited to the character's authoritative presence. He chose to lend a comic side to this father figure, particularly enjoying interrupting the lovers at the end of Act II and licking his lips at the thought of the riches he was to gain. Similarly, Byron Jackson, who alongside his duties as artistic director took on the title role, was a commanding figure on stage. His powerful voice cut through the orchestral texture, and he was captivating to watch, especially when singing alone.

In the absence of a set, director Iqbal Khan helped distinguish between the locations of the action, with the Steersman (Christian Joel) singing from the shore amongst



'O Captain! My Captain!' Daland (Gerrit Paul Groen, left) appears to be experiencing a moment of doubt, while the Dutchman (Byron Jackson) lives in hope. Photo: Persona Arts

the ticketholders, involving them directly in the unfolding drama. This staging choice was highly effective, although it required some suspension of disbelief, as the Dutchman's first monologue had been sung from the stage, and he subsequently travelled through the audience to join Daland on land – when strictly speaking Daland should have walked through the audience to go ashore. However, not all dramatic choices were as successful. The production often left characters in dialogue stuck downstage, forced to sing outwards rather than engaging with each other, and it laid itself open to the charge of scenes being unnecessarily static.

The male chorus, too, whilst impressive in its initial work, was less effective once singers had taken scores into their hands. The choristers were also stymied when positioned behind or next to the orchestra, when their voices were totally drowned out by the brass, a balance issue that might have been mitigated with more thoughtful staging or musical management. The ladies' chorus, and Laura Woods as Mary, made a welcome contribution, delivering an appropriately spirited and agile performance that set the scene for Mari Wyn Williams's Senta.

The opera's heroine was portrayed with deep emotional commitment. Williams's performance was enthralling owing to her rich, warm tone, focused vocal delivery, and dramatic intensity. Williams performs just as much when she is listening to other characters, such as Anando Mukerjee's charming Erik, as when she is singing. Her eyes are constantly alive, and had the rest of the cast followed her lead, some of the dramatic challenges of the staging may have been more readily tempered.

Press releases prior to the event referred to this as the UK's 'first ethnically-led Wagner production'; however readers may remember Samoan arts collective Gafa's full *Ring* cycle in London in 2021. This is not to take anything away from the important and impressive work of this company and its production. Indeed, this performance, whilst not without its flaws, has clearly demonstrated to any ambitious choral society or amateur orchestra that putting on a Wagner opera is a worthwhile, achievable and rewarding endeavour. With the fine professional solo singers that Jackson assembled and the wide range of performers gathered from across the community, Persona Arts have reinforced the enduring strength of Wagner's seafaring adventure, and reminded us that Wagner, and opera, can indeed be for everyone.