

Hugh the Drover Review – The Buzz (The Highgate Society Magazine)

PROFESSIONAL LIGHTWEIGHT KNOCKOUT IN HIGHGATE

By Edmund Gordon

What's this? 'Buzz' covering a local boxing promotion? No, relax! The headline concerns Hampstead Garden Opera's latest Upstairs at the Gatehouse production, of 'Hugh the Drover', by Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Around 1909 the composer asked a friend to suggest a librettist because he wanted to 'set a prize fight to music'. The fight occurs towards the end of Act I. It is difficult to stage a convincing fight. The small auditorium here must have made it harder. The contestants however battled convincingly, making it no surprise to note a Fight Director (Gordon Kemp) in the Production Team.

The well designed set, with convincing cobbles, by Charlie Tymms, placed the audience immediately in an old Cotswold town. Her costumes put the action accurately in period, prompting memories of Gillray. The lighting by Andrew Ellis went well with the set and dramatic action.

Music Director and Conductor Oliver-John Ruthven had successfully reduced the score to one for just 13 musicians in a small space. He and his répétiteurs had brought the cast (principals David de Winter (Hugh), Philippa Murray (Mary), Ed Ballard (John the Butcher), Camilla Bull (Aunt Jane), Barnaby Beer (Showman, Sergeant), Ian Helm (Constable) Nick Whitfield (Turnkey), Robert Davis (Ballad Seller) in the performance reviewed) to a musical optimum. The Dionysus Ensemble played lyrically under his direction.

The production, by Angela Hardcastle, was unobtrusively effective in driving the narrative. It created an atmosphere of which I felt Vaughan Williams would have been likely to approve.

The librettist found for Vaughan Williams was Harold Child, a leader writer on 'The Times'. The composer however modified the words while composing the opera, which he completed in 1914. He continued to revise both words and music until 1956.

From 1903 Vaughan Williams collected folk songs. This is reflected in 'Hugh the Drover', as in much of his other work. However, wider influences are perceptible. A Wagnerian since 1889 (his first marriage in 1906 was followed by a honeymoon in Berlin for a Ring Cycle) he studied not only under Stanford and Parry but Bruch and Ravel. The music of 'Hugh the Drover' evokes thoughts not only of Balfe, Sullivan and German but also of Wagner, Puccini and Richard Strauss.

Though 'Hugh the Drover' is not profound, it is an immediately enjoyable tale of triumph of good prevailing over evil, justice over injustice, after all seems lost, set to charming, occasionally sublime, music. Productions have been far fewer than the work might be thought to deserve. The hard work, scholarship and imagination behind this exemplary Hampstead Garden Opera production deserve substantial acclaim. Audience reaction suggests it was accorded.