

Susannah

Hampstead Garden Opera at the Gatehouse, London N6, April 30

Up some stairs round the back of a pub in Highgate, a tiny L-shaped theatre bustles with pre-performance clatter. Enthusiastic ushers shoo audience-members across the stage to their seats, and the orchestra, pared down to one-per-part and tucked off to one side in the small leg of the L, warms up with snippets of Americana. It's the fifth night of Hampstead Garden Opera's spring run of Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*, and it is completely sold out.

Floyd's 1955 work remains a rarity in Britain, staged here only twice before despite being one of the most performed American operas in its home country. The reason becomes apparent soon into the first act. Stock musical gestures and crooner ballads tell a sentimental tale of religion and lost innocence in the Deep South—more Broadway than bel canto; indeed, it took more than 40 years for the Met to grant the work its first and only production there. It's not easy, either, with thick scoring and lead roles that demand both vocal and theatrical prowess. On the night I attended, HGO's cast was held up by the superb soprano Helen Bailey, who applied full, gritty lower range and wide-eyed dramatic sincerity to the salt-of-the-earth teenage Susannah. Supporting roles were delivered with good intent and some fun hamming-up: Nick Whitfield added a touch of Lennie Small to Susannah's sweet but simple brother Sam; Zachary Roberts was all furrowed-brow and earnest vibrato as the young Little Bat McLean (surely one of the best-named operatic characters). Derek Henderson wore knee-pads, ready to fling himself at the ground in anguish as the God-fearing yet guilty preacher Olin Blitch. The chorus, an amateur group of all ages and vocal stages, milled around in period-ish attire, and those of us seated in the front row, which was pretty much on stage, felt fully absorbed into the seething, hypocritical crowd.

Dramatically convincing, then, despite the stodgy quasi-Biblical storyline and moments of vocal shakiness. Orchestral accompaniment was well provided by the Dionysus Ensemble (students and graduates of the Royal College and Royal Academy) and diligently conducted by Oliver-John Ruthven, who managed to cater to some singers' eccentric rubato tendencies. There were balance problems between hefty wind and brass and single strings, perhaps inevitable considering the lack of space, pit and strong vocal forces. Generally, though, the HGO is remarkably crafty with its self-funded resources. The chairman Alastair MacGeorge told me the company had rehearsed more for *Susannah* than for any previous production, and it showed; this was a carefully assembled and lovingly delivered piece of musical theatre. Not bad for a Thursday night down the local.

KATE MOLLESON