

A HARLOT'S PROGRESS

Vienna



THEATER AN DER WIEN. A new daughter of joy has found her way to the opera world. Her delights, however, are even shorter-lived than those of her abundant colleagues Violetta and Manon. We are talking about Moll Hackabout, a young woman from the English countryside determined to make it in the capital. She had her first appearance on six engravings by William Hogarth (1697-1764), who portrayed London's society like no one else in the eighteenth century. Not long ago this *Harlot's Progress* series attracted the eyes of a young composer called Iain Bell while he was searching for a new starring role for a friend, the celebrated soprano Diana Damrau.

Bell's first opera has its world première in one of the world's most innovative opera houses today, Vienna's Theater an der Wien. Named after the above-mentioned sequence of pictures this diligently and thoughtfully composed oeuvre proves Bell's great talent. He provides Damrau with a beautiful and demanding vocal line that focuses on her big assets: brisk successions from pianissimo to dramatic high notes and back, with suffering melismata, agitating coloratura and trills of insanity. It's fascinating to see how much Damrau merges into the main character, especially during Moll's ten minute-long insanity scene, rooted in her syphilitic infection and followed by her death. With wide eyes and crazy facial expressions, Damrau for a while

appears to be seized by possession, sucking away her vitality. It is an act to be remembered.

The composer knew the cast before he started to work, so most of the roles are tailor made: the Irish mezzo Tara Erraught does a tremendous job as Moll's only real friend Kitty. Mother Needham, the madam who sells Moll and Kitty to the old mister Lovelace (a vocally pale Christopher Gillett) is lyric soprano Marie McLaughlin, whose combination of singing and acting is persuasive. The same must be said of Nathan Gunn as Moll's fate, the pretty crook James Dalton. Three corrupt characters – coachman, police officer and jailer – are assumed by Nicolas Testé at his best.

To a large extent, however, their voices do not interact with the committed Vienna Symphony Orchestra. The gloomy score mumbles along, painting a dark picture of the social swamp of London. There is no mercy, no hope, no time for love. And hardly time for any psychological penetration of the main characters as the plot rushes from scene to scene. Not much is done to provide the audience with what makes great operas work: empathy. Why does Moll refuse the presumably redemptive coach back to her family while in prison? Why does Kitty stand by her until the very end? We might guess at the right answers thanks to the precious libretto by Peter

Ackroyd, but the orchestra – considered a 'sixty-headed hydra' by Bell – does not convey any of the underlying emotions. The realistic stage direction by Jens-Daniel Herzog is no big help, neither. There are several sex and rape scenes, but they leave us cold. The neutral setting, at least, is appealing. Stage designer Mathis Neidhardt delivers some kind of white-painted wooden box, and the costumes by Sibylle Gädeke are a mix of eighteenth century fashion with contemporary influences.

Some reviews have accused Bell of a lack of originality. I enjoyed the conventional style of his composition, which never runs the risk of sounding kitschy and that gets along without exotic instruments (there are tubular bells) and no technical knickknacks. This has become a curiosity among contemporary composers. That said, I am convinced his best music is yet to come. After attending the first two performances I am still not sure whether the reason for a rather flat sound in the first half of the opera could be explained by a lack of dramatic accentuations by the conductor Mikko Franck, or if it was up to the score. I would like to see this opera again, with more or less the same cast, with a conductor who places emphasis on hidden motives, and with more fanciful stage direction. It could work better, perhaps. Only time will tell.

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