

Better Late Than Never: Britten's *Gloriana* Makes an Impressive Madrid Debut

seenandheard-international.com/2018/04/better-late-than-never-brittens-gloriana-makes-an-impressive-madrid-debut/

Britten, *Gloriana*: Teatro Real Chorus and Orchestra / Ivor Bolton (conductor), Teatro Real, Madrid, 12 & 13.4.2018. (JMI)



Cast:

Elizabeth I – Anna Caterina Antonacci/Alexandra Deshorties

Earl of Essex – Leonardo Capalbo/David Butt Philip

Lord Mountjoy – Duncan Rock/Gabriel Bermúdez

Sir Robert Cecil – Leigh Melrose/Charles Rice

Frances – Paula Murrhly/Hanna Hipp

Penelope – Sophie Bevan/María Miró

Sir Walter Raleigh – David Soar/David Steffens

Henry Cuffe – Benedict Nelson

Lady in Waiting – Elena Copons

Blind Singer – James Creswell

Spirit of the Masque – Sam Furness

City Crier – Alex Sanmarti

Recorder of Norwich – Scott Wilde

Housewife – Itxaro Mentxaka

Master of Ceremonies – Gerardo López

Production:

Director – David McVicar
Sets – Robert Jones
Costumes – Brigitte Reiffenstuel
Lighting – Adam Silverman
Choreography – Colm Seery

Some 65 years after its London debut, Benjamin Britten's *Gloriana* has made its premiere in Madrid. This is not, however, its Spanish premiere; the work was performed at Barcelona's Liceu in 2001 by England's Opera North.

Gloriana is one Britten's least performed operas, and there are reasons for it. The opera is satisfying in musical terms, but less so from a dramatic point of view. The first part consists of a succession of scenes that run too long, and little or nothing happens on stage, but things change for the better in the second half. The fact that the opera was composed for the coronation celebrations of Elizabeth II perhaps explains it. The work centers on Queen Elizabeth I, and there is little drama until the final scenes when the action focuses on the relationship between the Queen and Essex and his death sentence.

This new David McVicar production is both simple and attractive. There is one set for the entire opera, consisting of a revolving platform with three golden arches, closed at the back with an elegant door, and with a hemicycle at the sides where the choir is placed. The changing props enliven the different scenes and are quite effective; the costumes place the action in the historical period of the opera and are particularly attractive and elegant in the case of Queen Elizabeth. There is a good lighting work, and the choreography plays an important role in the second act.

David McVicar employs the chorus almost like a Greek one, and the cast is well directed. The audience certainly approved, as evidenced by the fact that the creative team was received with sonorous applause at the final bows.

One of the most important aspects of the performance was the conducting of Ivor Bolton, the current musical director of Teatro Real. Although he is recognized in the world of opera for his interpretations of Baroque music, he also seems to have a special affinity for the music of Benjamin Britten, as he proved last season in a splendid *Billy Budd*. His conducting, in my opinion, was the best part of the entire performance. He offered a careful, heartfelt version where everything worked to perfection, and drew an excellent performance from the Teatro Real orchestra, which is probably the best pit orchestra in Spain.

The cast in this opera is quite large, but none of the characters can be compared in importance with the character of Queen Elizabeth I. To a large extent the success or failure of a performance of this opera depend on her.

In the first cast the Queen was played by Anna Caterina Antonacci, and she was excellent from beginning to end. She lived the character with intensity and conveyed great emotion in her monologue at the end of the opera – a worthy successor to the great interpreters of Greek tragedies. To this should be added her excellent diction. In vocal terms, she is not at the same level as last year in her Charlotte in Valencia. Her voice is somewhat reduced, and she showed signs of vocal fatigue, especially in her first scene. But her many virtues

mark her is a great artist.

The second Queen was soprano Alexandra Deshorties, whom I had not had the chance to see on stage since she sang the role of Fiordiligi in 2002. Her performance was totally convincing. Vocally, her voice has a restricted range and she gets somewhat tight and shrill at the high notes, but she is a solid performer on stage (although not at the level of Anna Caterina Antonacci, particularly in her monologue of the end of the opera).

Essex was played in the first cast by tenor Leonardo Capalbo, who was an adequate interpreter of the role. David Butt Philip's performance improved as the opera progressed; his voice was rather light and his singing flat in the first part, but he was much more convincing in the last act.

Duncan Rock was a correct Lord Mountjoy, while Gabriel Bermúdez in the second cast offered musicality but a voice of limited amplitude. Leigh Melrose did well as Sir Robert Cecil, while Charles Rice was no more than correct. David Soar was good as Raleigh in the first cast, as was David Steffens in the second.

Paula Murrin and Hanna Hipp both gave solid performances in the part of Frances, Countess of Essex, while Sophie Bevan and María Miró sparkled as Penelope. Among the rest of the numerous characters, I would single out bass James Creswell as a Blind Singer and tenor Sam Furness as the Spirit of the Mask.

José M. Irurzun