Leeds' Opera North commemorates end of World War I—Part 2

Silent Night, Songs of Love and Battle, Symphony of Sorrowful Songs, Last Days, Not Such Quiet Girls

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This is the second of two parts. Part one *was posted on January 22.*

Songs of Love and Battle was performed at Leeds Town Hall as part of Opera North's World War I commemorations. A micro-opera, it was composed to feature the company's three Youth Ensembles, numbering around 100 local young singers aged seven to 18.

The young performers played multiple roles, as townspeople, English and German soldiers, mourners and narrators. The music made no concessions to their youth. It was fast and complicated; they sang against the orchestra and against each other, without scores and without missing a beat.

Commenting on his piece, composer Will Todd said, "*Songs of Love and Battle* provides a narrative on the pain and devastation of war, and a perspective on the young lives lost on both sides. With such brilliant young singers and the expertise of the creative and musical teams at Opera North, I know that the first ever performances in Yorkshire will be amazing events." He was not disappointed. They were magnificent.

The opera is in eight parts, with a libretto by Maggie Gottlieb, and tells the story of a young Yorkshire woman Eth (Fflur Wyn) and her brother Jack (Johnny Herford). It opens in 1916, as villagers confront the terrifying sight of an enormous Zeppelin crashing down in flames. Eth cares for a dying German airman in her farmhouse and somehow, they share Lord Byron's poem, *So we'll go no more a roving.* The poem acts as a kind of motif throughout the piece.

The scene changes to a recruitment fair in August 1914, where Jack is caught up in the wave of patriotism that sweeps the country. The recruiters sing "Join up here! Have no fear! We'll march to Berlin and back before New Year!" Jack joins one of the "Pals battalions," the brainchild of Field Marshall Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener. Men were promised they could fight alongside their neighbours from the northern industrial towns, forming the Bradford Pals, the Accrington Pals, the Liverpool Pals and so on, who would soon return from war to guaranteed employment.

In June 1916, Jack writes to his sister, telling her, "Sometimes we hear the Germans singing—they sound just like us." As they wait for the 'big push' (that was to become the bloody Battle of the Somme), Jack tells his pals, "Hush! Listen—they're singing over in the German trench." A tender German song of love and longing is heard, and an exchange of singing takes place. But the preparations for battle continue. At home, loved ones are desperate for news. Eth thinks of her brother and recalls "the German boy dying in Yorkshire in a stranger's arms, in my arms, dreaming of home!"

As the battle commences the children become narrators and chant over driving percussion:

At half past seven in the morning
On the first day of July, 1916
The Pals battalions went over the top
Alongside the whole army
To launch the battle of the Somme.
Within twenty minutes, most were dead.

The opera ends with a Requiem for the dead of both sides. Eth again remembers the German boy, "who did not hate us, and I did not hate him. And before he died he told me a poem. Now I realise it is for all of us who have lost the ones we love:

So we'll go no more a-roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright.

Finally the children take up the lament:

For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself have rest.
Though the night was made for loving,
And the day returns too soon,
Yet we' ll go no more a-roving
By the light of the moon.

There was real poignancy as the children related this terrible story in their innocent young voices. The chorus master told me they had to be very careful in rehearsals because some of the youngest children

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found the story upsetting. They asked, “Why did they have to die?” “Why did they drop bombs?”

In fact, the losses were so great—with the youth of entire communities decimated in a single day—that the Pals battalions were disbanded to disguise the scale of carnage. As for the promise of a return to guaranteed jobs, that was soon forgotten.

Will Todd’s piece is extremely powerful and deserves to be more widely known.

The evening’s programme included *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* (Symphony No. 3) by Polish composer Henryk Gorecki, written in 1976 for orchestra and soprano soloist (Fflur Wyn). The work is in three movements, each marked “Lento” (to be performed slowly). The performance was searingly sad, giving expression to the primeval cry of every mother who has lost her son in war. When it ended, the silence was palpable.

Two smaller scale works were performed “in the round,” in the intimate setting of the Howard Assembly Rooms, used as a rehearsal space for Opera North.

Last Days was originally commissioned by University of Toronto Opera in 2014. It was performed in Leeds by 12 young opera singers training at the National Opera Studio and was truly memorable. It is a kind of montage, made up of songs, poems and other readings of the highest quality.

The performance begins with a group of young people in the pre-war period, enjoying cabaret songs by Arnold Schoenberg, Erik Satie and others. Suddenly their world is shattered with a reading from “The Vision,” the first chapter of Henri Barbusse’s anti-war novel, *Under Fire*, which graphically describes the hell of war. War is declared and they rush to don uniforms, as soldiers or nurses. From then on, their story is told through songs and readings.

It begins with Charles Ives’ rousing patriotic song, *He is there!*

For it’s rally round the flag boys
Rally once again,
Shouting the battle cry of freedom.

This is immediately followed by *The lads in their hundreds*, a heartrending setting by George Butterworth of a poem from A.E. Housman’s *The Shropshire Lad*. Butterworth was one of the most promising composers of his generation. He died in the Battle of the Somme in August 1916.

And so it continues. There are songs by Alban Berg, Ivor Gurney (who spent most of his life after the war in a mental hospital, partly due to his experience of being gassed in September 1917), Gustav Mahler, Francis Poulenc, Benjamin Britten, Maurice Ravel and others. There were poems by Siegfried Sassoon, Oscar Wilde, Ford Madox Ford and readings from the works of, W.N.P. Barbellion, Vera Brittain and others.

It was an ensemble performance of the highest quality, with the songs and poems linked together by the excellent acting of the talented young singers and the imaginative production of director Tim Albery.

In contrast, the fourth piece, *Not Such Qui et Girls*, was an example of the corrosive influence of identity politics on the creative process. The writer, Jessica Walker, was commissioned to create a piece to feature the female voices of Opera North’s chorus. She was given a free hand and could have written about any aspect of the experience of the women whose lives were completely transformed by the First World War.

Inspired by “an incongruous photograph of young female ambulance drivers wearing fur coats over their uniforms,” she chose to write about these young women who were recruited to drive ambulances near to the front because their families were rich enough to own cars in 1914.

No doubt a compelling piece could have been written about the experiences of such women, who must have confronted daily the utter brutality of war.

Mary Borden, author of *The Forbidden Zone*, came from a similar background. She was a rich young American from Chicago who volunteered to work as a nurse in the French sector. Appalled by what she witnessed, she financed a hospital and later wrote about her experiences. In the chapter “The Conspiracy” in her memoirs, she bitterly commented on her role as a nurse, “Everything is arranged. It is arranged that men should be broken and that they should be mended… And we send our men to the war again, just as long as they will stand it; just until they are dead, and then we throw them into the ground.”

Such passionate anti-war sensibility is entirely absent in *Not Such Quiet Girls*. The war is a mere backdrop. The piece concentrates almost exclusively on the freedom the conflict bestowed on these young women, freed from the constraints of men “to do what we like.” “At last I’ll know what it is like to have freedom. I’m having the time of my life.” As the war ends, a lesbian affair also ends, with a character declaring, “This is a luxury I can’t afford. I have to go home to do what is expected of me—to become a wife and mother.” Her lover comments, “Straight women are so fucked up!”

The women’s chorus of Opera North demonstrated their acting and singing skills brilliantly throughout the piece. But the material, in my opinion, was not worth the effort.

Overall, Opera North must be congratulated for producing such a wonderful and thought-provoking commemorative program. The strength and sincerity of the performances and the strong connection made with audiences, night after night, are testimony to widespread hostility to militarism and war.

Concluded

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