

George Benjamin - Written On Skin (2012)

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1. *Written on Skin* 1:36:33 Barbara Hannigan (Agnès) Christopher Purves (The Protector) Bejun Mehta (Angel 1 - The Boy) Rebecca Loeb (Angel 2 - Marie)british Allan Clayton (Angel 3 - John) Mahler Chamber Orchestra George Benjamin - composer, conductor Grand Théâtre de Provence, Aix-en-Provence

The premiere of George Benjamin's 'Written on Skin', inspired by 12th-century Occitan legend, was the haunting highlight of this year's Aix festival.

Despite its less-than-appealing title, George Benjamin's important new opera *Written on Skin* is full of beautiful and haunting things. Anyone queasy at the prospect of the world's first tattooing opera will be relieved to find that "skin" here alludes to medieval parchment, and that one of the three principal characters is an illuminator of manuscripts.

As it turns out, some genteel tattooing would be nothing compared to the violent denouement – involving a little light cannibalism, which may indeed be a first in opera – but the scenario certainly inspires Benjamin's most vivid music to date, in a score embracing everything from sensuousness to explosive ferocity. Like the first, the Pied Piper-inspired *Into the Little Hill* (2006), it sets a text by the playwright Martin Crimp, who bases his libretto on the gruesome 12th-century Occitan legend of the troubadour Guillem de Cabestany.

In the postmodern twist Crimp and Benjamin give it, three contemporary angels bring the trio of medieval figures back to life. We see how a powerful landowner (called the Protector) commissions an artist (the Boy) to celebrate the achievements of his family, and how the Boy's meticulous work attracts the admiration of the Protector's young wife, Agnès.

He awakens the repressed passion of Agnès, who asserts herself as an independent woman rather than a possession of the Protector. But soon she unsuspectingly finds herself eating the Boy's heart, served up by her murderous husband. She throws herself to her death. Crimp's libretto is cleverly constructed in 15 scenes, perhaps too cleverly, at times, for there is something self-conscious about the protagonists' use of the third person in their recounting of events. This, too, encourages the director Katie Mitchell to add her own layers of interpretation, not always helpful in such a finely wrought new work.

Her staging, though, is beautiful to look at. Vicki Mortimer's multi-roomed, double-storey set is divided into "then" and "now", lit in contrasting yellow and white by Jon Clark. The angels inhabit a space that resembles an archaeologists' laboratory, but one room is never entered by anyone: doubtless all very meaningful, and in keeping with the slightly "distanced" effect of the piece.

Indeed, despite its English libretto the whole thing feels rather French, but then Benjamin, as well as being one of the leading British composers of our day, could aptly be described as the finest French composer since his teacher Messiaen; his colouristic imagination clearly comes from that tradition. Using a large orchestra sparingly and unleashing it only in the interludes, he conjures up glistening, mysterious sounds and never drowns his singers.

Conducting the premiere himself, Benjamin was rewarded with wonderful playing from the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and an outstanding cast. Weaving high, melismatic lines, the soprano Barbara Hannigan and countertenor Bejun Mehta capture the strange intensity of the piece, and Christopher Purves uses his warm, clear baritone to disturbing effect as an increasingly ogre-like Protector. Doubling on angelic duty, Mehta is joined by Rebecca Jo Loeb and Allan Clayton. ---John Allison, telegraph.co.uk

The premiere of *Written on Skin* was the operatic event of 2012, proof that opera can move contemporary audiences through its capacity – that might prove to be stronger than cinema – to adapt past subjects and the great motifs of our culture to present preoccupations. With *Written on Skin*, Martin Crimp and George Benjamin transfigure the medieval fabliau of the eaten heart as a parable of desire.

The traditional love triangle is somewhat shaped by experience through a dialogue which absorbs the narration, the breathtaking unfolding of the theme of illustration and the hypnotic dramatic ceremonial designed by Katie Mitchell. What glory does the lord of the place aspire to? What does the illuminator really intend to draw in his home? What recognition does the wife, Agnes, expect? What delicious dish can forever prevent her from eating? What is that skin on which the story is being written? For the first time in the history of opera, the driving force behind the drama is no other than women's pleasure. ---opera-comique.com

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