

Britten's Coronation tribute at last? A crowning moment for Gloriana at the Royal Opera House

Benjamin Britten's 1953 opera was a Coronation tribute that went badly wrong – but perhaps a revival at the site of its disastrous premiere could rescue it yet, says Jessica Duchan

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It was not Benjamin Britten's finest hour. The world premiere of his *Gloriana*, written to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, was a flop.

Opening night, 8 June 1953, found dignitaries, ambassadors, court officials and the youthful monarch assembling in the Royal Opera House for the glittering occasion: a new opera about the young Queen's namesake, Queen Elizabeth I. Yet such was the apparent disappointment with it that, despite successful airings at Welsh National Opera and Opera North in intervening decades, its original venue has not attempted to stage it again. Now, after 60 years, a new production by the director Richard Jones is to open there at last.

Jones, in this co-production with the Hamburg Staatsoper, has updated the setting to 1953, so that the opera's action – which concerns the relationship of Elizabeth and Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex – takes place as a play within a play, framed by the exact era of its composition. The designs by Uitz present children in grey uniforms and a dilapidated wooden school hall – within which bright colours, vivid dances and stylised backgrounds evoke what could be the 1950s' idealised, escapist vision of the 16th century, including lettering formed from stacked vegetables and a golden coach made entirely of roses. A star-studded British cast is headed by the soprano Susan Bullock as Elizabeth and the tenor Toby Spence as Devereux, and Paul Daniel conducts.

This is an anniversary year for both the Queen and the composer; the event is a major contribution to the Britten centenary celebrations. But it's time to take stock. Whatever went wrong with *Gloriana* back in 1953? The short answer is: just about everything.

"This was an opera written with the bunting up," says Toby Spence. "Britain had just come out of the Second World War and had only just got past rationing. We were still a broken country, so any excuse to get out the banners and flags and give them a wave was gratefully received."

The opera received financial support from the still-new Arts Council and Britten worked under extreme pressure to finish the score in about nine months (most operas take several years). He was aided and abetted in its administration by Imogen Holst, daughter of the composer Gustav Holst, who helped to make its completion viable.

An official, courtly stage work nevertheless seemed a strange direction for a composer not noted for his prime place in the establishment. During the war, Britten had been a conscientious objector; and he was homosexual – publicly so in his long relationship with the tenor Peter Pears. The climate of the Cold War and the ripples of McCarthyism were making themselves felt all too strongly at the time; the display of patriotism and pageantry around the Coronation was perhaps partly a veneer over an atmosphere of alarm and repression.

Britten habitually depicted the latter qualities rather better than he did pomp and circumstance. One of his great strengths in opera was his ability to evoke empathy for the vulnerable and the alienated. And so he does for Queen Elizabeth I. *Gloriana* – with a libretto by William Plomer based on Lytton Strachey's book *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History* – shows her as a complex, ageing woman facing intense personal anguish, her public self essentially forced to destroy the man she privately loves. The premiere's audience, less than conversant with contemporary music, arrived hoping for royal celebration. They did not get it.

It was said that the newly crowned queen was not too taken with the subject matter; Lord Harewood described the event as "one of the great disasters of operatic history"; and the work was omitted from a supposedly complete recording of Britten conducting his own works. Its failure had lasting effects on the composer: "Afterwards, he closed in upon himself," says the conductor Paul Daniel.

According to Mark Ravenhill, who has written a play for BBC Radio 3 entitled *Imo and Ben* about the creative process behind *Gloriana*, Britten was somewhat naive. "He didn't think strategically or politically – he just thought it was a great story," Ravenhill suggests. "But just at the moment when people were trying to invest the young queen with all the regalia of royalty, to show an old woman being divested of that seems a really bad choice."

Spence points out that the work is not without structural problems. "It is a more difficult opera to stage than Britten's others, because it's more chopped up," he says. "But the music is as beautiful as anything else he wrote."

Daniel indicates Britten's technical expertise. "The whole point is that Queen Elizabeth I is very public, on view and on trial as a woman and as a queen; but on trial in her own mind, she tortures herself with her private life," he says. "Britten jumps brilliantly from one side of her existence to the other... rather like a brilliant film-maker." He suggests that the disastrous opening night was not solely about the work, but also concerned the performance: "There is a recording of that premiere and musically it was a sorry experience."

Ravenhill, though, nails the paradox at the heart of the matter. "I was intrigued by the idea of an artist being commissioned to write a sort of national work of art – rather like the opening ceremony for the Olympics – and how much was at stake in that idea," he says. "The Arts Council and public subsidy was new and in many ways this was a test case."

"I think Britten felt ambiguous about that. He wanted that national recognition, partly because it said something about the importance of opera, which still was not really valued as an English art-form. Nevertheless, he knew that his art was not best made as national

and official – and that maybe he worked better when he was writing for a group of friends at home in Aldeburgh.”

To Spence, Britten nevertheless did exactly the right thing: writing from the heart and to his own strengths, putting humanity above all else, no matter the establishment reaction. “I don’t think an artist should ever pander to a set of invisible rules by which people are made to conform,” Spence says.

Today *Gloriana* is free to prove its worth. Let’s hope the Queen may like it better this time around.

‘Gloriana’, Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000) 20 June to 6 July; Live cinema relay 24 June; Mark Ravenhill’s ‘Imo and Ben’ is on BBC Radio 3 on 30 June at 8.30pm