

## The Gospel According to the Other Mary opera review: John Adams' triumphant update of the Passion of the Christ

Five Stars **\*\*\*\*\***

English National Opera, London

by Jessica Duchen, Saturday 22 November 2014

John Adams received a rapturous response for the world premiere staging at ENO of his Passion oratorio, *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* – and well he might. Bursting with fury, compassion and inspiration, this elemental score seems to carry the composer to a whole new level of expression.

With his long-time collaborator and stage director Peter Sellars, Adams has updated the *Passion of Christ* to the present; the action zips between ancient Bethany and, for example, 20th-century Mexico. Time, as Lazarus tells us in Primo Levi's Passover poem, "reverses its course".

The many texts include words from the Bible and poems by writers ranging from Hildegard of Bingen to Rosario Castellanos, Louise Erdrich and more, often highlighting the women's point of view; this enhances, but is not solely responsible for, the piece's overwhelming sense of empathy. Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha run a hostel for homeless women; Jesus – never seen, but is portrayed variously by the three Seraphim (counter-tenors functioning together) and the dancers who complement the singers throughout – seems as human as he is divine.

The Los Angeles Philharmonic and its conductor Gustavo Dudamel performed the oratorio in semi-staged concert at the Barbican last year. But now Sellars has given it the works. The result bears familiar hallmarks such as exaggerated miming gestures for the chorus; yet in this context it seems unusually organic. George Tsypin sets the fluid drama in a striking, simple stage: barbed wire fences, draped gauzes projected with giant drawn images, and cardboard boxes to serve as Lazarus's tomb, dinner table and angel's plinth. James F Ingalls's lighting is warm and immersive, its gorgeous colours

often rooted in the text – “blazing ochre, blazing rust”.

As for Adams, you might not guess that this composer had ever been branded a “minimalist”. The jagged accents, sustained melodies, keening strings, intense woodwind dissonances, and the orchestration tattooed with cymbalom, plentiful percussion and three tam-tams, all feel closer than he has moved before to the European avant-garde. The expression travels from burning meditative reflection to a radiant spring dawn, laced with the sound of frogs. Dramatically the pace sometimes feels extended, but the long build-ups fuel terrifying climaxes in the crucifixion and the earthquake.

Patricia Bardon as Mary Magdalene presents a character whose fragility and introversion is balanced by a state of sensual grace, her voice traversing a range to match; Meredith Arwady’s powerful contralto packs a punch as Martha; and the American tenor Russell Thomas as Lazarus is charismatic in both presence and tone. The countertenors Daniel Bubeck, Brian Cummings and Nathan Medley as the Seraphim strike a good balance between togetherness and individuality.

Black mark, though, to the ENO programme for not providing biographies (ie, adequate credit) for the dancers - especially the flex dancer Banks who, as the Angel Gabriel, presented physical power and eloquence that was more than the equal of the singing.

The Other Mary is ultimately a choral piece more than an opera, and the ENO chorus and orchestra carry the bulk of it, their vastly demanding parts shouldered with huge aplomb. The Portuguese conductor Joana Carneiro is at the helm of the entire tour de force, pulling together this magnificent and suitably impassioned creation.