

Der fliegende Holländer, Royal Opera House, review: An immersive and immersing experience

It pulls you into its depths even if you don't get splashed en route

by Jessica Duchen, 10 February 2015

Before the opening night of *Der fliegende Holländer* some of the Royal Opera House Orchestra had already taken a soaking; apparently the patch of on-stage sea for act III found its way into the pit at the dress rehearsal. But Tim Albery's Olivier Award-nominated staging, first seen in 2009, is an immersive and immersing experience, pulling you into its depths even if you don't get splashed en route.

Like many of the most interesting Wagner productions, it is not overloaded with activity, but homes in on human interaction, within elemental shapes; the basic concave shell could be a sail, a wave, a ship's belly, or the slope of the shore's hillside. Dark, stark and strong, it is impressively lit by David Finn, with intriguing angles, sometimes harsh, sometimes beautiful, usually symbolic. There seems no need to interpret to excess. Senta's obsession with the Dutchman comes across not as psychosis, but a genuine love; at the end, instead of throwing herself into the sea, the poor girl seems to die of grief. The mini model ship, though, sometimes feels like a prop too far.

There are two ways, very broadly speaking, to treat this opera. It can emphasise the influence of its musical roots, including Italian bel canto, Weber and Marschner (his *Der Vampyr*); or it can look forward to the composer's mature masterpieces. It can be gothic horror with high emotion and great tunes; or a dusky foreshadowing of the philosophical drives that Wagner brought to bear on the Ring cycle and its companions. This account is the latter in no uncertain terms: Albery's atmospheric staging and Andris Nelsons's spacious conducting combine into a seriously grown-up performance.

Bryn Terfel's Dutchman is so strongly characterised that the doomed seaman's entire history seems visible at his first entrance, weary and burdened, dragging

the ship's rope around his shoulders; vocally he paces himself finely, saving the strongest for last as the dramatic tension peaks. As Senta, Adrienne Pieczonka is simply magnificent, with a warm and radiant voice that melts in its lower register and cuts higher up, and the ability to inhabit the role to heartbreaking effect. The central pair are more than superbly supported by Peter Rose as Senta's father, Daland; tenor Michael König is a lyrical Erik; and in smaller roles the contributions of Ed Lyon as the Steersman and Catherine Wyn-Rogers as Mary were outstanding. One of the night's biggest plaudits, though, goes to the chorus: the terrifying clash of the locals and the ghost ship's crew in act III packed a massive punch.

Some elements perhaps still need to settle a little; on this opening night it was hard not to wonder whether Nelsons' drawn-out tempi challenged sustaining power too much. The overture dragged surprisingly – not aided by the hypnotic waves of grey curtain rolling from left to right – but Nelsons' skill as an accompanist with forensic control of line and texture allows the singers to shine without shouting, to be supported without ever being drowned.