

'Billy Budd' delves into universal themes

By ERIC PETERS

The Metropolitan Opera, on tour in Detroit last week, can be very proud of its production of "Billy Budd," the third of Benjamin Britten's 15 operas. There was a dimension of realism within the structure of allegory about good and evil which kept the audience thinking soberly about the theme more than the music or production.

E.M. Forester's libretto (with Eric Cozier) was a major challenge to the novelist and brought him out of a depressing slump in his career. His adaptation of Herman Melville's novel about the nature and consequences of inhumanity aboard a British warship, 1779, is a compact, highly polished statement on war, impressment (taken by force), oppression, false suspicion and injustice. It is a modern theme, timeless in its implications. Like the characters, Britten's skillfully worked musical elements are often in deliberate struggle, pulling upon one another, creating a mood of tension and discord as in the pitting of B flat major chords against the B minor. A very good production, the singing

was not quite tight and powerful enough at all times, yet the loss of dynamics was more likely due to Britten's writing than from pallid interpretation. There was some weak projection in the first act which improved in the second, but it remained difficult for less than prime seat holders to understand words sung in the lower registers.

THE ORCHESTRA'S performance was the best I've ever heard from the like. Raymond Leppard was splendid. He conducted with a keen edge of energy and fine detail which combined the excitement of drive and dynamism with matchless precision.

Throughout the opera, the singing relies on the orchestra for structure, direction and variety. Leppard never flagged there.

Britten's decision to use an exclusively male cast without adding a female voice for contrast suited the story of a crew on a warship. This low range vocalizing in a largely recitative non melodic style is effective in small doses, but in excess, it dangerously approaches dullness.

review

Highly colored woodwind touches and bursts of brass brought a brilliance to the texture which overawed the conservative range of voices.

In the score, Britten deliberately avoids sustaining the moments of excitement so as not to overpower the somber theme with inappropriate emotions.

Thus, melodic beauty drifts in and out to tantalize without commanding. It is musically the innocent and cheerful Billy Budd's effect on the crew of broken spirits, raising flickering hopes which are re-submerged under a heavy burden of despair.

THE FULL CHORUS of men singing as they work during the chase of the French vessel and in the mutinous wellings at the end brought satisfying and powerful elements to the score. One of the few joyful passages is even noted by the captain as his crew sings

sea chanteys and relaxes below deck. In other places there are hints of folk or sea songs offering many unused possibilities for building emotions, or as material for greater variety in the duets. But, Britten continued to dominate with declamatory discord.

Captain Vere was wonderfully sung with a sympathetic portrayal by tenor Richard Cassilly as the aging captain of the Indomitable. Through his tired eyes and guilt-ridden mind, we see two men who were once under his command turned almost into archetypes of truth and falsehood. With remorse and regret he recalls how he failed to save Billy's life by adhering without thought to the articles of war in a time of threatened mutiny.

Billy Budd, sung by baritone Richard Stilwell, was full of charm and energy. He sets the tone for his later behavior when he is first impressed from a passing merchant ship. He makes the audience laugh when he announces that he can sing and is told that it doesn't matter. He stammers under stress, a fatal flaw which prevents him from defending himself against false charges of mutiny brought by the ship's master-at-

arms, Claggart.

James Morris, bass, sang a marvelous Claggart, especially the fine fagot-like solo, a declaration of evil intent. He showed just the right measure of cold cruelty and calm arrogance as he seeks to destroy Budd for the positive attitude he brings to the downtrodden, terror-stricken crew.

Guilt or innocence mean nothing to Claggart and truth is a device to be twisted and distorted in the normal course of his job. Budd, the most obvious target, must be eliminated ruthlessly. In addition, a homosexual undercurrent was evident in Claggart's preoccupation with Budd in "Handsome is as handsome does."

BUDD, ACCUSED BY CLAGGART on trumped-up charges before the captain, can't speak in his own defense. He strikes out with a blow that kills his

accuser instantly. In the wonderfully constructed trial scene, he is sentenced to death because the captain won't defend the man he has made a victim. Yet, Budd forgives and goes to an unjust death, hanging by the yardarm.

Detail was extraordinarily good. The set by William Dudley amazingly resembled a real ship's quarterdeck. Work scenes of swabbing and preparing for battle made clear this ship was all business.

With a flawless orchestral effort, a strong cast, stunning set design and a remarkable score, the opera was memorable.

Britten's music remains difficult. It isn't an unalloyed masterpiece and wasn't a resounding success. Like so many contemporary and English language operas, it was underattended and simply not popular.

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