

Opera

Just say noh

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One of the proudest boasts to come from Britten HQ in Aldeburgh during the composer's anniversary last year was that performances of his works were proliferating across the globe — and not just in the UK — as never before. If the Opéra de Lyon might be a little late to the anniversary party in featuring Britten in its annual Eastertime opera festival only this year, the fact that it's doing so at all certainly provides evidence of the composer's worldwide reputation, as well as of the artistic adventurousness of Serge Dorny, reinstalled for the time being as the opera house's boss after a short-lived stint at Dresden's Semperoper came to an abrupt end in February. It also speaks volumes for the house's excellent, unshowy Japanese music director, Kazushi Ono.

Here Ono was in charge of the two new productions, of *Peter Grimes* and *The Turn of the Screw*; the third work was *Curlew River*, the first of Britten's Church Parables, in a production by Olivier Py that was seen in Edinburgh nearly a decade ago. Together, the three works give a pretty decent conspectus of Britten's development as an operatic composer, and all deal with the outsider protagonists to which he was instinctively drawn. A less PR-friendly common thread was that of abused and murdered children; the fact dead young boys feature, in some guise or another, in all three didn't really chime with the chirpy 'Keep Calm and Listen to Britten' banner that adorned the façade of the city's opera house — drastically modernised a couple of decades ago, so that inside it manages the impressive feat of suggesting simultaneously both the interior of a night

club and the exterior of a battleship.

In any case, this *Grimes* — staged by the Japanese director Yoshi Oida — was not as fiercely confrontational as some: it was certainly no match in that regard for David Alden's production at ENO, still fresh in the mind after its revival earlier in the year. This was a poetic, often beguiling staging, in which the chorus seemed less to be taking part in the drama itself than to be just another part of the fluid scenery (designed by Tom Schenk) — lots of rusty metal: storage crates, a small boat and a vast, riveted dappled backdrop — which was moved around to create some striking moments of dreamy stage magic.

Against this backdrop, Alan Oke's *Grimes* was a conventional outsider, although one whose sadness and tragedy remained tangible — largely thanks to the powerful advocacy offered by Britten's score — despite the short temper and wiry aggressiveness. Too many words were lost in German soprano Michaela Kaune's Ellen Orford, but she sang the notes beautifully. Rosalind Plowright was a formidable Mrs Sedley and Benedict Nelson smoothly ingratiating as the laudanum-pushing Ned Keene, but Andrew Foster-Williams's Balstrode felt a little undercharacterised. Overall, while the piece still packed its punch, the performance at times felt strangely placid, especially since Ono's conducting favoured slow-burning musical continuity ahead of moment-by-moment drama.

His approach to Britten's coldly brilliant ghost story was similarly patient, while Argentinian director Valentina Carrasco's production provided more magic. Carles Berga's design featured a large platform (with scattered props hinting at the interior

at Bly), which would rise up to reveal the overgrown garden beneath. As the evening progressed, the props and characters were increasingly whisked up into a cat's cradle-like web to dangle in midair, where they were picked out in Peter van Praet's precision lighting. Hints of *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* were unavoidable, but there was an entirely apt intricate brilliance to it. Andrew Tortise's Peter Quint was as insidious and creepily seductive as he should be, while Giselle Allen was a focused, fierce Miss Jessel. Two local youngsters, with matching light-blond bobs, were excellent as the children Miles and Flora.

Given the Japanese flavour to the *Grimes*, there was a pleasing symmetry in having *Curlew River* as the final work. And the piercing, potent economy of Britten's noh-inspired parable — not much over an hour in length, and featuring a handful each of instrumentalists and soloists, plus a small chorus — came across brilliantly in Py's intense production, which creates an hypnotic sense of religious and theatrical ritual. The American tenor Michael Slattery gave an overwhelming performance as The Mad Woman, his face daubed in red greasepaint. William Dazeley's noble Ferryman and Lukas Jakobski's imposing Abbot were outstanding. But the performance as a whole was so concentrated that, despite the power of *Grimes* and the precision of *The Turn of the Screw*, and the fact that *Curlew River* was conceived for church performance, here the piece came across as the most dramatically compelling of all three.