

Beguiling score haunted by horror

OPERA

BRUNDIBÁR

JUBILEE HALL, ALDEBURGH

Although the spectacle of smiling kiddies singing cheerful *Play School* music is something we have cynically learnt to distrust, there is still something deeply shocking about the hinterland of *Brundibár* – a brief one-act opera filled with sunny music by Czech Jew Hans Krása that was performed 50 times in Theresienstadt concentration camp by Jewish children and filmed for propaganda purposes. The cast and composer died in Auschwitz.

To double the irony, the plot seems to contain the

most blatant satire of Hitlerian tyranny imaginable: two poor children sing in the market to raise money for their ailing mother. A greedy organ-grinder, Brundibár (Bumblebee), tries to stop them, until a sparrow, cat and dog come to their aid and chase him away. It seems astonishing that such a fable wouldn't have been rumbled, but then one can never underestimate Nazi stupidity.

Jubilee Opera, Mahogany Opera Group and Watford Palace Theatre have joined forces to present the piece, which is popular in the US but has been slower to catch on in Britain, perhaps because Britten so decisively occupies the "opera for children" spot with *Noye's Fludde*. However,

Brundibár emerges here as a beguiling score of alphabetical simplicity and melodic freshness that tugs at the heartstrings and sets feet tapping, framed by Adolf Hoffmeister's libretto, which is crisply translated by Jack Wake-Walker.

The production, directed by Frederic Wake-Walker, mercifully avoids jackboots and swastikas: Anna Jones's designs are two-dimensional picture book, and bass Piotr Lempa, the only adult professional involved, is a fairground figure. Children from local schools performed with gusto: Julian Edwards as the sick mother's son and Ashley May as a pompous policeman made a particularly strong impression.

A band drawn from the Southbank Sinfonia was conducted by Alice Farnham, who valiantly kept things together: if the show seemed a bit rough round the edges, that was part of its charm.

Because *Brundibár* is barely half an hour long, a programme filler is required, so the first half of the show consists of choral and solo songs, led by the excellent Lempa, many of them also associated with Theresienstadt and its inmates. However nicely the children sang, one couldn't help shivering. *Touring February to June. Tickets: 020 7848 7314; mahoganyoperagroup.co.uk*

⊕ RATING ★★★★★

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