

# *Early Modern Literary Studies*

***The Pilgrim's Progress*, music and libretto by Ralph Vaughan Williams with occasional verses by Ursula Vaughan Williams, presented by the English National Opera, London Coliseum, 24 November 2012.**

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Directed by Yoshi Oida. English National Opera Orchestra conducted by Martyn Brabbins. English National Opera Chorus directed by Martin Fitzpatrick. Set and Video designed by Tom Schenk. Lighting designed by Lutz Deppe. Costumes designed by Sue Wilmington. Choreography by Carolyn Choa. With Roland Wood (baritone) as The Pilgrim, Toby Girling (baritone) for Benedict Nelson as Evangelist/Watchful/a Shepherd, Mark Richardson (bass-baritone) as Mistrust/Apollyon/Envy/a Shepherd, Timothy Robinson (tenor) as Interpreter/Usher/Mr. By-Ends/a Shepherd, Eleanor Dennis (soprano) as Shining One/Madam Wanton/Voice of a Bird/Celestial Voice, Colin Judson (tenor) as Timorous/Lord Lechery/Celestial Messenger, Ann Murray (mezzo-soprano) as Madame Bubble/Madam By-Ends/Celestial Voice, Aoife Sullivan (soprano) as Shining One/Branch Bearer/Malice, Alexander Sprague (tenor) as Pliable/Superstition/Celestial Voice, George von Bergen (baritone) as Obstinate/Herald/Lord Hategood, Kitty Whateley (mezzo-soprano) as Shining One/Cup Bearer/Pickthank/Woodcutter's Boy, and the English National Opera Chorus.

When Bunyan noted in the prologue to *The Second Part of The Pilgrim's Progress* (1684) that his "Pilgrims Book has travel'd Sea and Land," he had no idea just how far his "little Book" would venture, or how often his story would be re-told (137, 135). Translated into over a hundred languages and shaped into everything from board games to devotional handbooks, Bunyan's Nonconformist allegory of a Christian's journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City has proven as steadfast as its protagonist, even if Bunyan's theological intentions often disappear in the process. Ralph Vaughan Williams's opera, or morality as he sometimes preferred, first performed in 1951 as part of the Festival of Britain, is arguably the most monumental of these adaptations, re-telling Bunyan's gritty narrative of salvation as an elevated, sophisticated work of post-war national resilience, spiritual universality, and musical

ceremony. Yoshi Oida's direction of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the first professional, fully-staged version of the opera since the premiere, continued this process of universalizing Bunyan with mixed success, for while Vaughan Williams's music and libretto reinforce each other, Oida's attempt to universalize the libretto by staging it as a tale of existential and physical incarceration lost touch with the music at key points.

Following the disappointing premiere of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Vaughan Williams explained that he "on purpose, did not call the Pilgrim 'Christian' because [he] want[ed] the music to be universal and apply to anybody who aims at the spiritual life whether he is a Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Shintoist or 5<sup>th</sup> day Adventist".<sup>1</sup> The suggestion is that Bunyan's seventeenth-century Nonconformity should not get in the way of the nationalist, agnostic spirituality underlying the music. The opera was historically situated to celebrate Englishness and commemorate the nation's fortitude during the war. Changing the name of the protagonist was only one of the strategies Vaughan Williams used to move his opera away from Bunyan and toward national music and universalist spirituality: his emphasis on ritual action creates an atmosphere of High Church ceremony in the House Beautiful (Act 1.2), Arming of the Pilgrim (2.1), and Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains scenes (4.1) that would have been foreign to the Bedford preacher. At the same time, the opera is far from universal, if by that we mean "the spiritual life" emptied of specific religious traditions and histories: the cross is prominent in Act 1.2, the libretto includes numerous quotations from the Bible, especially the Psalms and the Gospels but also the Revelation, and the final act presents Christian completing his journey in the Celestial City to a resounding heavenly chorus, before the narrator awakens from his dream vision in the epilogue.

Oida eliminated the frame story told by an unnamed narrator in Bunyan's text and by Bunyan the character/narrator in Vaughan Williams's libretto, transforming the story into the wish fulfillments and fears of a condemned Everyman/Pilgrim. "All of us are prisoners," reflected Oida in a pre-performance interview. "How do we find real freedom, and how do we get out of the biggest prison of them all—the fear of death?"<sup>2</sup> This was reinforced by Tom Schenk's intriguing set: stark prison bars always loom darkly on stage, but various panels shift to adapt to the action. For the most part, this experiment worked remarkably well. We first meet the Pilgrim in prison with a burden on his back, in this case a child's coffin, a haunting detail that is at once more particularized than Christian's "burden" of sin in Bunyan's text, but more universal at

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Cobbe, ed. *The Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1895-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 485.

<sup>2</sup> Rupert Christiansen. "Yoshi Oida: What made this man turn to John Bunyan?". *The Telegraph*, 5 November 2012. 1-3; <[www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/opera](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/opera)> [accessed 7 November 2013].

the same time. The path to the Celestial City, “an open road stretching out straight from the back of the stage” in Vaughan Williams’s libretto (61), is a steep set of iron stairs and a platform in this production, and characters move in and out of dream and reality: Vaughan Williams’s Woodcutter’s Boy becomes a Tea Lady in the prison and fellow inmates become menacing Neighbours and Doleful Creatures as well as participants in an initiation ritual influenced by the stylized movements of Noh theatre when Pilgrim enters the House Beautiful.

The sheer number of adaptations was often overwhelming, but the prison metaphor helped to keep the shifting montage in focus, at least until the last two scenes. The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains were a lawyer, priest, and doctor preparing the condemned man for the electric chair, raised prominently above the stage, but beneath a video screen. Against the background of some of the most achingly beautiful music of the opera and superb vocal performances by Toby Girling, Mark Richardson, and Timothy Robinson as the shepherds, the staging was too detached from the score to be anything but grating and bluntly ironic. Images of water were flashed on the screen to remind the bewildered audience that strapping the Pilgrim into the electric chair paralleled the River of Death in Bunyan’s allegory, and the powerful flash of light as the Pilgrim was executed, or dreamed his execution, replaced the vision of heaven for Bunyan and Vaughan Williams. While the disjunction between Vaughan Williams’s soaring Chorus at the end of the opera, although here rather truncated, and the somewhat aimless protagonist on stage might have been the whole point, it resulted in an embarrassing dramatic moment. The production was too timid in not taking further steps away from its source text to reveal that heaven is the character’s wish fulfillment, opting for incoherence instead.

Conversely, the Vanity Fair and the Apollyon episodes, with the help of costuming and choreography by Sue Wilmington and Carolyn Choa, were engaging because the music and staging worked together. The battle was a dream sequence in which a small bunraku puppet fought a pile of prison garbage that swelled into a surreal, menacing giant with a mechanical, disembodied voice. As strange as it sounds, it worked. Vanity Fair was an explosion of gaudy colour, frantic music, sexual transgression, and camp posturing: the tassles, bumping and grinding, pouting, and garish makeup while predictable were a welcome change from the gloomy prison and sedate pace. Lord Lechery was especially transfixing in her/his half-male and half-female costume. One of the triumphs of the opera was achieved later in this scene when the Chorus of Vanity Fair intoned at full volume, “Away with him!” over heavy, plodding timpani and blaring trumpets as the Pilgrim was dragged away to prison, and the first part of the performance came to a close.

The real highlight of this production was the music, including the orchestra, the Chorus, and individual performances. Martyn Brabbins and his orchestra had full control of the work's range, which is considerable since it integrates parts developed by the composer for different works at different stages of his life, forming a kind of spiritual autobiography. From the simple but dignified brass arrangement of a sixteenth-century hymn that opened the opera, the swirling, turbulent passages that evoked the Pilgrim's spiritual struggles, and the exquisite viola of the Delectable Mountains scene, to the resonant clarinet layered over the strings to introduce the Woodcutter's song, the brisk, satirical woodwinds and comical tuba of the By-ends scene, and the sublime conclusion, with its full orchestral version of the hymn tune, rapturous choral alleluias, and recapitulations of motifs associated with Pilgrim in Act Three interwoven and rising to a climax, the orchestra proved more than equal to the challenge of Vaughan Williams's complex and emotionally exhausting masterpiece. Roland Wood's Pilgrim was one of a number of superb vocal performances as well. His baritone was sturdy and flexible enough to carry the narrative load of the opera, but also capable of soulful richness and passion, as in the aria from prison. Eleanor Dennis's duet with Wood on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm was inspired, and Kitty Whateley's version of the Woodcutter's Boy's song made me forget it was sung in a prison. I must admit I closed my eyes to erase the stage just briefly. Toby Girling's admirable performance on November 24<sup>th</sup> should be mentioned, too, since he was called to replace Benedict Nelson at the last minute in three important roles.

As unforgettable as this production was, it raised as many questions about staging Vaughan Williams's interpretation of Bunyan's allegory as it answered. Certainly Bunyan's episodic plot and theological discursiveness call for careful selection, rearrangement, and omission if any kind of dramatic interest is to be sustained for a multicultural or post-Christian audience. At the same time, when the theatre doesn't follow the music, which, in spite of its universalist intentions, evokes Bunyan's Christian vision, the theatre can unravel at key dramatic moments. Oida's imaginative and provocative interpretation, while well worth flying 15,000 km in three days to see, proved to me that there is still room for another attempt to stage this challenging work. I just hope we don't have to wait another sixty years.

### **Works Cited**

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