



Classical music

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|Review|

The week in classical: Peter Grimes; Parsifal; Yunchan Lim - review

Millennium Centre, Cardiff; Temple Church; Wigmore Hall, London

Depleted yet straining every sinew, Welsh National Opera deliver a formidable new *Peter Grimes*. Elsewhere, down the aisle with Wagner and fearless Bach from the world's next great pianist



Fiona Maddocks

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T-shirts emblazoned with “Save our WNO” are now default concert uniform for the orchestra of Welsh National Opera, a silent protest in the pit while playing with customary supreme professionalism. When called on stage with their instruments to take a curtain call at the end of WNO’s new *Peter Grimes*, the applause in Cardiff’s Millennium Centre was deafening. This dress code began last summer, when funding cuts to WNO were announced, referred to several times [in this column](#). At the risk of banging on, I’ll bang on. Industrial action continues, after a re-ballot [last month](#). We have watched a cash-starved English National Opera shrivel. WNO’s position is perilous, with no rescue rope in sight.

Communal solidarity heightened the intensity in Melly Still’s new staging of *Grimes*, perceptively conducted by the company’s admired music director, Tomáš Hanus. In Chiara Stephenson’s designs (lighting Malcolm Rippeth), the Suffolk coast of composer Benjamin Britten, and of George Crabbe, poet of the original story, has vanished into a generic, semi-urban no man’s land. Emphasis now is on psychology and character. A near empty stage and black backdrop offer simplicity for touring, but also reflect a need for thrift. The wooden boat suspended above the stage, slowly spinning, casting shadows, gives us a taste of the sea, now a frame for a starry sky, now a mandorla to hold the wan figure of Grimes’s dead apprentice, who becomes an almost sacred figure.

■ ■ *Nicky Spence, mighty actor as well as fine singer, commands the stage without dominating*

Making his debut in the title role of the fisher-outcast, the tenor Nicky Spence led a formidable ensemble, with Sarah Connolly luxury casting as a Lycra-jeaned, spiky-haired Auntie, big-hearted but tough, and David Kempster as the morally conflicted Balstrode. All supporting roles were

nimbly characterised: Catherine Wyn-Rogers as the neighbourhood snoop Mrs Sedley; Fflur Wyn and Eiry Price as Auntie's cute-girl nieces; Dominic Sedgwick as the silky-smooth apothecary, among the many.

Tousled but leonine in ginger wig, Spence, mighty actor as well as fine singer, commands the stage without dominating. From his first, floated words, his Grimes reveals himself as a figure of visionary intent, affectionate to Ellen Orford (a sympathetic Sally Matthews), impetuous, self-possessed but also quick to flare. As tension rises, Spence turns his fidgets and twitches into a terrible boogie of anxiety and obsession. Four young acrobats, rippling in breakdance moves, add resonance, if not necessarily relevance. Depleted in permanent numbers but here swelled with freelance singers, the chorus sang their lungs out.

As WNO's new co-directors, Adele Thomas and Sarah Crabtree, pointed out in a rallying address from the stage, *Peter Grimes* was written in 1945, one year before WNO gave its first performance. Britten's opera [has never been in better artistic health](#). This company, achieving work of the highest standards, is on life support. Nicholas Serota, chair of Arts Council England, is reported to have been in the audience last week. I wonder if he was struck, entering the Millennium Centre, by the irony of huge hoardings announcing a new, enlarged gift shop selling treasures "inspired by the magic of Wales". Nothing wrong with that, but a reminder that money can be found if the will is there.

Still on matters Cambrian, or very nearly, it may have escaped your notice that Parsifal, knight of the holy grail, was Welsh. Chrétien de Troyes, who first put Arthurian legend into writing in the 12th century, called him "le Gallois" - the Welshman. Conversely, or perversely, Wagner preferred the idea that the name was Arabic, meaning "perfect fool". It suited his purpose for his final opera, **Parsifal** (1882). Full of Christian symbolism but equally pagan - a long and knotty subject - the work has become associated with Easter. Last week, on two evenings, Act 3 was staged [in Temple Church](#), which dates back to the time of Chrétien.



Orpheus Sinfonia, conducted by Peter Selwyn, perform Act 3 of Parsifal at Temple Church. Photograph: Ben Meadows

Performed in a deft new orchestration by Matthew King, directed by Julia Burbach, the simple action took place on a platform along the nave of the church, with Simon Wilding as a grizzled Gurnemanz, Neal Cooper as the wandering Parsifal and Freddie Tong as a sharp, besuited Amfortas. These expert soloists, Orpheus Sinfonia and a small, elite chorus conducted by Peter Selwyn, mustered all the conviction needed to fill this ancient space with Wagner's perplexing religiosity and, arguably, his most magnificent score. Quite how this event came about is nearly as mysterious as the meaning of the opera itself, but the performances were sold out and the Wagner-hungry audience cheered.

Spoken of as the next big star of the coming half century, 21-year-old South Korean pianist [Yunchan Lim](#) has travelled the world in recent weeks performing Bach's Goldberg Variations. For a player renowned for the Romantic repertoire - his Van Cliburn competition-winning performance of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No 3, when he was only 18, [went viral](#) - the Bach, written for a two-manual harpsichord, is an adventure. Lim, who rushes straight to the piano stool, face obscured by long dark fringe, conjures every kind of effect, never shy of maximising the potential of a modern piano. Leading voices punch out from the counterpoint, as in Variation 10, Fughetta, with eccentric, wilful energy. He takes intrepid leaps at the airborne runs and ornaments of, say, Variation 28. Each shift of mood is a discovery.



📍 Yunchan Lim at Wigmore Hall. Photograph: Wigmore Hall Trust

This is intelligent playing of spellbinding virtuosity. Lim will refine it, distil it, find more inner voices, as he did in the introverted Variation 25, the so-called "black pearl". You may be wedded to Glenn Gould or András Schiff or Igor Levit or, on harpsichord, Mahan Esfahani: whoever delivers Bach the way you want. For now, enjoy the exuberance of this brilliant young player in all his coltish glory.

Star ratings (out of five)

Peter Grimes ★★★★★

Parsifal ★★★★★

Yunchan Lim ★★★★★

Peter Grimes tours to [Southampton](#) (30 April), [Birmingham](#) (10 May), [Milton Keynes](#) (17 May) and [Plymouth](#) (7 June)

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A message from Betsy Reed, editor of the Guardian US



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