

Opera: Written on Skin at The Royal Opera House

A heavenly tale that gets under the skin

Jessica Duchen 8 March 2013

According to the director Katie Mitchell, it was not so much a standing ovation as “an eruption” that greeted the world premiere of George Benjamin's *Written on Skin*. A rapturous response for contemporary opera is rare, to say the least, but at last summer's Aix-en-Provence Festival, critics and public were swift to declare this one a masterpiece. Now coming to the Royal Opera House, it is based on a 13th-century Provençal story entitled *Guillem de Cabestanh – Le Coeur Mangé* (“The Eaten Heart”), and brings together the leading British composer's precisely wrought music with an original text by Martin Crimp.

A group of present-day angels, world-weary and vengeful, awaken from the medieval dead three people: the Protector (Christopher Purves), his wife Agnès (Barbara Hannigan) and a character named simply the Boy (Bejun Mehta) – in fact, one of the angels – to re-enact the worst moments of their lives. Agnès begins a passionate affair with the Boy and demands that he enters this fact into his book commissioned by the Protector. The Protector murders him, then forces Agnès to eat a meal which he later declares was the Boy's heart. Agnès defies him: nothing he can do will erase the taste. Before he can kill her, she leaps from a window to her death.

As Crimp's libretto presents it, this dark history is anything but realistic. Each character narrates his or her own actions while living them; medieval depictions rub shoulders with contemporary evocations of multi-storey car parks, motorways and red shoes; the two worlds bleed imagery into one another. Benjamin's music is virtually a form of hyper-realism, highlighting the nuances of the emotions as if placing them under a microscope.

Benjamin is a notorious perfectionist. He was only 20 when a work of his was first performed at the Proms but at 52, he still has fewer than 40 works in his catalogue. Following a triumph with a 35-minute drama, *Into the Little Hill*, also to a libretto by Crimp, this is his first full-length opera. And there is a chance that this work may open the floodgates at last.

“While I was writing it I became a complete recluse,” he says. “I devoted myself, all day, to a degree of concentration and submersion in work that I've never experienced before. But it came out, for me, very quickly – the whole process took under two and a half years.”

Perhaps that means that he is, at heart, an opera composer? “There's something in that,” he says – and confirms that he and Crimp are now discussing their next project.

Written on Skin, Royal Opera House, London WC2 (www.roh.org.uk) to 22 March