

A Visit to Friends, Aldeburgh Festival: an exceptionally subtle and affecting take on Chekhov

The debut opera from composer Colin Matthews and novelist William Boyd is a beautifully crafted meta-romance

★★★★☆ 4/5



Marcus Farnsworth and Susanna Hurrell in *A Visit to Friends* at Aldeburgh Festival Opera Credit: Richard Hubert Smith

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The composer Colin Matthews has been for so long a central part of the Aldeburgh Festival, assisting Benjamin Britten in his final years, then as chairman of the Britten Estate, and mentor of so many young composers at the

Britten-Pears School, that it is perhaps surprising that he has never written an opera.

Now, working with the novelist William Boyd as librettist, he has conceived an exceptionally subtle and affecting one-act drama, interweaving an imaginary chamber opera based on a Chekhov short story with a modern rehearsal of the piece, with eloquently entangled results.

The original Chekhov narrative of 1898 is a meditation on the transience of happiness and innocence lost: Misha is revisiting the dilapidated country estate where the mature Vadia and the younger Nadia live, and their emotional states are rekindled as both are in love with him – or the idea of him – but he cannot commit to either. The 10 scenes alternate between this story and the modern rehearsal of a newly-rediscovered opera based on it, with the characters Natalie and Vanessa playing the two women and Marcus as the visitor.

This could all be deeply confusing, but the clear direction by Rachael Hower, and designs by Leanne Vandenburg, sharply clarifies the interactions, mostly with a set that revolves between the scenes, alternating the opera's Chekhovian setting with the modern rehearsal room. A well-observed rehearsal pianist supports the singers and the director Gregor, who also plays a silent Chekhov at the start and finish (with impeccably behaved dog Shosty).

There is a clear delineation between old and new in this staging, but Matthews has chosen not to reflect this in his score, which is through-composed in an idiom that echoes the early style of the Russian composer Scriabin rather than his own mature modernism. This blurs the temporal framing of the piece, and cleverly enables him to evoke a rhapsodic romanticism at the moments when the two women express their love for the same man.

It becomes increasingly clear that both Misha back then, and Marcus right now, cannot cope with the women's attentions, and he retreats from the scene. The revelation of the present-day relationships renders the opera impossible to produce. Misha's ultimate dilemma, his weakness, is the focus of Chekhov's story, and really the story should just evaporate at this point, but here it is Vanessa who has the last word with a visionary aria about life's choices as the scenery hovers between old and new.

The four singers – Lotte Betts-Dean and Susanna Hurrell as Varia/Vanessa and Nadia/Natalie, Marcus Farnsworth as Misha/Marcus and Edward Hawkins as the director Gregor – project Boyd’s rather conversational text with clarity, and while Matthews’s vocal writing may not provide sharp delineation between the characters, it is beautifully crafted to allow the words to project.

As has happened before in Matthews’s pre-operatic work with voices, it is in the dramatic instrumental interludes between the scenes that the passions are fully unleashed, and conductor Jessica Cottis evokes these powerfully with the superb players of the Aurora Orchestra. We are left with the regretful, Chekhovian sense that much remains unspoken and unsung in the taut drama we have witnessed.

A Visit to Friends is at Aldeburgh Festival again today, at 4pm; auroraorchestra.com/event/a-visit-to-friends