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A Visit to Friends/The Gildas Quartet review – Colin Matthews's luminous new opera opens Aldeburgh in fine style



Snape Maltings, Aldeburgh/Orford Church, Orford

With a Chekhov-inspired libretto by William Boyd, this 'opera within an opera' had an excellent cast and a lucid staging. Another brand new work by Colin Matthews – his vivid Quartet No 6 – featured the following morning



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📷 Thespiness ... Colin Matthews' A Visit to Friends at Aldeburgh festival. Photograph: Richard Hubert Smith

Few events feel as haunted as the [Aldeburgh festival](#). Nearly 80 years since it was [established by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears](#) – and decades since their deaths – the couple still loom large in its Suffolk environs, their project continued by younger friends and collaborators.

None are more eminent than the composer [Colin Matthews](#), who [assisted Britten](#) in the final years of his life. Now 79, Matthews has produced his own first opera, on a Chekhov-inspired libretto by [William Boyd](#): the world premiere of *A Visit to Friends* opened this year's festival, on the same stage where Britten's *Death in Venice* made its debut 52 years ago.

A Visit to Friends features an opera within the opera: scenes of a work with a libretto by Chekhov and a score by an unknown composer that Matthews models on [Scriabin](#) are interrupted by the “real world” of rehearsals. Life imitates art imitating life; it's “a very complicated visit to friends”, as one character says. We hop between stages of the rehearsal process, while the internal opera's plot pushes on.



📷 Naturalism ... *A Visit to Friends* at Aldeburgh festival. Photograph: Richard Hubert Smith

In [Leanne Vandenburg](#)'s ingeniously simple set, the wall of a modern rehearsal room revolves to reveal the disintegrating veranda of a once-grand Russian house.

Harsh lighting flicks up as run-throughs are halted. The rehearsal pianist slides on and off (upright and all). Colours play constantly across a video backdrop, as if taking the temperature of the action. Matthews' score moves between the charged, late-Romantic meandering of the internal opera and something a little more incisive for the rehearsals. But much of the music is slow and delicately loose-limbed, its stagiest moment (a freeze-frame-like trio and quartet) in "real life", not the fictional opera. Gesturally, though, the opera's thespianess – hand-clasping, studied pointing, walking with an extravagant turning-circle – is a world away from the rehearsal's naturalism.

That the self-conscious cleverness of the framing device didn't pall says much about both the quality of performance and the lucidity of [Rachael Hewer](#)'s production. The small cast was uniformly excellent: [Marcus Farnsworth](#) was smoothly unpleasant as Misha/Marcus, [Susanna Hurrell](#) a bright, brittle Nadia/Natalie and [Edward Hawkins](#) a pitch-perfect parody of a certain brand of director. [Lotte Betts-Dean](#)'s Varia/Vanessa dominated, her mezzo so effusively rounded it was as if she kept finding the resonant frequency of the auditorium. Conducted by [Jessica Cottis](#), [Aurora Orchestra](#) revelled in Matthews' suavely luminous score.

More Matthews followed the next morning: the world premiere by the [Gildas Quartet](#) of his Quartet No 6, between the Three Idylls by [Britten's teacher Frank Bridge](#) and Beethoven's String Quartet No 9 in C, Op 59 No 3. The eight movements of Matthews' quartet were vividly characterised: there were impish cascades of pizzicato, melodic lines that wandered, unhurried, and a slow-motion elegy that lingered like the perfume of a loved one. Bridge's Three Idylls showcased the Gildas's fine-grained, mellow tone and total musical symbiosis. Their Beethoven was exquisitely stylish, from the cool, vibrato-free introduction to its final intoxicating rush. It was an utterly compelling performance: exhilarating playing that urged us to listen anew.

[The Aldeburgh festival](#) continues until 29 June.