

16 June 2025

FIRST NIGHT

## A Visit to Friends review — premiere filled with lush and gorgeous sounds

The composer Colin Matthews takes centre stage as the Aldeburgh Festival opens with his new ‘opera about opera’, ingeniously scripted by William Boyd



Lotte Betts-Dean, who plays a spurned former lover, stars alongside Marcus Farnsworth

RICHARD HUBERT SMITH

[Richard Morrison](#), Chief Culture Writer

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Three singers rehearse a newly discovered opera with a libretto by Chekhov and music by an unknown composer. In the opera two women are in love with the same man. Life imitates art, and the same thing happens in the rehearsal room — with predictably catastrophic results.

Ingeniously scripted by William Boyd, this is the basis of Colin Matthews’ new “opera about opera” *A Visit to Friends*, which had its premiere in Snape Maltings to open the Aldeburgh Festival. The first thing to say is that much of the music is gorgeous — gorgeously played by the

Aurora Orchestra conducted by Jessica Cottis; gorgeously sung by Edward Hawkins, Susanna Hurrell, Marcus Farnsworth and particularly Lotte Betts-Dean, who has the plum role of the spurned former lover.

And gorgeously composed by ... well, that's more complicated. Matthews says that for the "rediscovered opera" scenes he drew on existing music by Scriabin (who did meet Chekhov). But it is virtuosically reworked by Matthews, who imbues it with an incredibly lush hyper-romanticism.

Occasionally Boyd's lines feel dated, almost like something Noël Coward might have written. But there's nothing dated about Farnsworth's superb portrayal of a sexually predatory star performer. The opera world still has its share of those.

Rachael Hewer's staging, although saddled with a superfluous video screen, makes the divisions between real life and theatre crystal-clear with a revolve stage. And having a real dog to play Chekhov's pet was a huge hit with the audience, especially with another distinguished composer, Mark-Anthony Turnage, moonlighting as the dog's handler. It's disappointing, to put it mildly, that a production featuring such a superb array of British musical and literary talent has disappeared after two performances, without even a BBC Radio 3 broadcast.

Aldeburgh's opening weekend also included another Matthews premiere: his Sixth Quartet, sandwiched between the wistful romanticism of Frank Bridge's *Three Idylls* and the stirring muscularity of Beethoven's Op 59 No 3 in a fine recital by the Gildas Quartet. Matthews packs eight little movements into 17 minutes, each carrying the name of an ancient dance form such as courante or waltz-makurka. But unlike in his opera, there's no pastiche involved. Instead a hint of each dance rhythm, nothing more, is used to trigger a set of miniature mood-pictures deploying everything from scampering pizzicato to eerily meandering atonal polyphony. Matthews has contributed so much behind the scenes over the decades to keep the Aldeburgh Festival alive and kicking. It's fitting that, for once, he is centre stage this year.

★★★★☆

**90min**

**Festival runs to Jun 29, [brittenpearsarts.org](http://brittenpearsarts.org)**