

# THE STAGE

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## A Visit to Friends review



“Opulent score and solid performances”

REVIEWS JUN 16, 2025 BY INGE KJEMTRUP [SNAPE MALTINGS CONCERT HALL, SUFFOLK](#)



*A Visit to Friends at Snape Maltings Concert Hall, Suffolk. Photo: Richard Hubert Smith*

### Life mirrors art in Colin Matthews' Chekhov-inspired opera

Life mirrors art in Colin Matthews' opera, receiving its world premiere on the opening night of the [Aldeburgh Festival](#). A first venture into opera for the 79-year-old Matthews and his librettist William Boyd, it rewards its

audience with an opulent score, solid performances from its five-strong cast and an inventive set that makes the most of the constraints of the venue.

This ‘opera within an opera’, to borrow director Rachael Hower’s phrase from a pre-concert talk, centres on three modern-day singers rehearsing a (fictional) opera by Chekhov and an unknown composer. Boyd based his libretto on a Chekhov short story of the same title, a tale Chekhov omitted from his collected works. In Boyd’s view, this is because the character of Misha, the commitment-phobic Moscow lawyer, was too honest of a self-portrait for Chekhov, who avoided marriage until he was 39.

Matthews, meanwhile, took his musical inspiration from the late Romantic soundworld of Alexander Scriabin, who met Chekhov in 1903. Jessica Cottis deftly conducts the Aurora Orchestra and the singers on stage, giving full expression to Matthews’ lush score.

As the scenes move between rehearsal room to opera stage, it’s obvious that Marcus ([Marcus Farnsworth](#)) has been typecast in the role of Misha. He smoothly seduces the naive young soprano Natalie (Susanna Hurrell), while keeping his former lover Vanessa (Lotte Betts-Dean) on the line. Marcus explains his shallow philosophy to a wide-eyed Natalie, about to play Nadia: “All things must pass,” and defiantly tells Vanessa/Varia that: “I won’t let feelings rule my life.” Gregor, the opera’s director (Edward Hawkins), tries with limited success to moderate his passionate performers, while pianist Chris (Gary Matthewman) casts a wry eye on the proceedings.

The performers’ personal lives increasingly overlap with their characters’, a conceit that doesn’t always persuade. Central to the short story is the fact that the two women are in dire financial straits: Varia’s husband (who doesn’t appear here) has recklessly squandered their money. The two women pin their hopes on Misha, believing that a strategic marriage will save them. Their pecuniary difficulties, although mentioned, are

downplayed in favour of the romantic entanglements and Misha's seeming indifference to enduring love. But in the original story Podgorin (Misha) gives money to the women, easing his guilty conscience as he makes his escape back to Moscow.

Integral to this production is the ingenious revolving platform (set design by Leanne Vandembussche). This makes for swift transitions between rehearsal room and stage. The ever-changing videos (Sasha Owen) sympathetically underscore the mood on stage, as does the lighting by Danny Vavrečka.

Chekhov's female characters were well-rounded and sympathetic, even if their feelings, like those of their male counterparts, are often obscured. It's the sadder, wiser Vanessa who takes off the mask to reveal her true feelings in a memorable final aria, a fitting conclusion to the opera.