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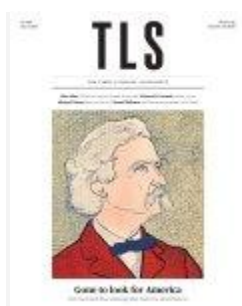
Nothing is really hidden

A Chekhovian opera from Colin Matthews and William Boyd

By **Guy Dammann**



Susanna Hurrell and Gary Matthewman in *A Visit to Friends* | © Richard Hubert Smith



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Chekhov toyed with the idea of writing an opera on several occasions, once with Tchaikovsky, for whom he proposed writing a libretto based on Lermontov's story "Béla"

(from *A Hero for Our Time*), and once with Rachmaninov, with whom he discussed adapting his own story, “The Black Monk”. Toward the end of his life, in 1903, he was visited at home in Yalta by an admiring young composer called Alexander Scriabin. It is not known what they talked about.

We do know what the composer Colin Matthews and the author William Boyd talked about when they met for the first time in 2019, because their topic was precisely Chekhov and Scriabin’s conversation. Or, more properly, the fruit it might have borne had Scriabin gone on to compose a Chekhov opera based on the latter’s short story “A Visit to Friends”; and, more properly still, the thought that an anonymous manuscript of the work, by Scriabin or another composer very like him, might have been unearthed in a Moscow archive and a staging attempted. The fruits of this conversation opened the 2025 Aldeburgh Festival in the form of a world premiere of a chamber opera about an attempt by an opera director, three singers and a repetiteur to stage such a work.

Operas about putting on operas, from Antonio Salieri’s *Prima la musica e poi le parole* to Richard Strauss’s *Ariadne auf Naxos*, are something of a niche sub-genre, albeit one that is usually the preserve of seasoned composers and librettists seeking to express something of the ironic distance that accrues over the course of a long career in a genre. It may seem rather an odd choice for Matthews and Boyd. Seasoned artists both may be, but neither has written an opera before. Yet their shared interest in Chekhov, remarkable fluency in crossing between epochs and styles, and penchant for constructing, then solving, technical puzzles means the *recherché* direction that they took with the project seems quite natural.

It plays naturally too. The opera’s eight scenes are woven around, or rather into, four scenes from the “rediscovered” work, based on a concentrated version of the original story (which Boyd used previously in his 2013 play *Longing*) and presented in rehearsal. Chekhov’s odious Sergei is excised, and the characters of Tatiana and Varia are combined, so that the focus is entirely on the love triangle between Misha, a Moscow lawyer returning to the crumbling country estate in which he spent much of his youth, his old flame, Varia, a doctor whose income is no match for the disastrous estate finances, and her younger sister, Nadia, still a child when Misha last visited, but who has long been in love, as Varia puts it, “with the idea of Misha”.

The three Chekhov characters are to be sung by three modern-day soloists: Varia by the well-known mezzo Vanessa (Lotte Betts-Dean), who once had a fling with the high-flying baritone Marcus, who plays Misha (Marcus Farnsworth); Nadia is played by a young soprano called Natalie (Susanna Hurrell), starstruck by her senior colleagues, particularly Marcus (who was clearly not paying attention when the #MeToo campaign turned to the opera house). Their somewhat distracted director is Gregor (Edward Hawkins), assisted by the sympathetic and jolly repetiteur Chris (Gary Matthewman), who plays the piano on stage, offering occasional spoken interjections that arrest the increasingly agonistic flights of fancy of the singers, getting them back on track.

The rehearsals, which range from early sing-throughs to full generals, do not go well – though they sound absolutely lovely, set for chamber orchestra (and sometimes just piano) by

Matthews to a loving and richly melodic pastiche drawn from Scriabin's early style, in particular the Fourth Piano Sonata. And, although Matthews's artistic personality is evident in the lithe and volatile rhythmic profile of the rest of the score, Scriabin's idiom haunts the music throughout. Indeed, the contrasts between the "Scriabin" and "Matthews" music decreases as the opera progresses, shadowing the growing entanglement between the singers and their characters.

This entanglement, and the way it forces concealed aspects of both the Chekhov characters and the modern-day singers into the light, is in many ways the primary subject of the opera, summarized neatly by Gregor early on: "They try to hide their feelings, but nothing is really hidden." And indeed, Chekhov's original story, a kind of allegory on the death of poetry, plays with the way shifts of perspective and sensibility bring worlds of possibility into and out of reach. This is borne out as the modern characters and the problematic relationships between them come painfully into focus during their attempt, and eventual failure, to realize the manuscript.

It is beautifully done. Jessica Cottis guides the soloists and the pared-down Aurora Orchestra in the music's many subtle shifts of style and temporality with a remarkably concentrated energy, and Rachael Hewer's stage direction is exemplary. Leanne Vandebussche's ingenious set revolves between a sparse rehearsal space and the dilapidated verandah of Varia's dacha in such a way that the pacing, despite the many intricacies of the plot(s), feels every bit as relentless as one of Boyd's novels, or for that matter one of Matthews's orchestral scores – a real stage-turner, as it were.

The piece is rich in comedy, but the structure is fundamentally tragic, the dramatic crisis of the opera dovetailing with that of the opera within it when, in the dress rehearsal for the penultimate scene, in which Varia and Misha seem about to kiss, Natalie screws up Nadia's interruption by calling out for "Marcus". In the ensuing confusion, the four soloists reflect on art's revelatory quality, singing a brief quartet to the words "The mists may clear for a moment, and that alone is worth it." Worth it indeed, but Matthews doesn't dispel the mist completely, blurring the synchronicity between the singers' lines so that you can hear the process of entanglement descending on the scene. From there, despite attempts to institute minor changes (Natalie and Marcus suggest that Nadia and Misha should kiss; Gregor decides that Vanessa and Misha should), it becomes clear that the path is set and that the opera, at least in this constellation, won't make it to opening night. At the end, Chekhov, out for a walk with his dog (played by the director's dog, Shosty), looks back on the path not taken and now lost. It doesn't matter whether his melancholic gaze is directed toward Varia or Vanessa, since the difference has become immaterial.

Matthews worked as Benjamin Britten's assistant until the latter's death in 1976 and is still chair of the Britten estate. He is a much-loved figure at the Aldeburgh Festival, where a sizeable majority of the composers have much to thank him for in the way of opportunity, advice and encouragement. His rich and remarkable back catalogue is still somewhat eclipsed by his early work, a complete performing edition of Mahler's Symphony No 10 produced with his brother David and Deryck Cooke, as well as his more recent, and ravishing, orchestrations of Debussy's two books of *Préludes*. A concert by the Gildas Quartet in Orford Church the morning after the first of the opera's two performances featured the

premiere of his String Quartet No 6 (a kind of suite in which his distinctively punchy rhythmic profiles jostle with more melancholic slow dance movements), beautifully framed by performances of Frank Bridge's richly lyrical *Three Idylls* and Beethoven's explosive third *Razumovsky* quartet. Performances of *Paraphrases* for violin and piano (written for Leila Josefowicz), and *Two Tributes* (which kicks off a showcase of pieces nurtured through Matthews's Aldeburgh-based New Music Now workshop) also feature. Given that so much of the composer's career has been focused on others, it was a welcome sight to have him, for once, basking shyly in his own limelight. There are as yet no definite plans for the opera to be staged elsewhere, though it certainly merits it.

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