

Leeds' Opera North commemorates end of World War I—Part 1

Silent Night, Songs of Love and Battle, Symphony of Sorrowful Songs, Last Days, Not Such Quiet Girls

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This is the first of two parts.

Opera North, based in the West Yorkshire city of Leeds, staged a week of performances November 30-December 7 to commemorate the end of World War I. Included were two new commissions by the company and the British premier of *Silent Night*, by American composer Kevin Puts.

Silent Night is an operatic adaptation of the 2005 film *Joyeux Noel*, directed by Christian Carion. The film was inspired by the spontaneous ceasefires that took place along the 700-kilometre Western Front on the first Christmas Eve of the First World War.

Carion dedicated his film “to the memory of the soldiers, German, British and French who fraternised on Christmas 1914.” Later commissioned by Minnesota Opera, *Silent Night* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2012, with a libretto that draws heavily on the film scenario. It is sung in three languages, German, French and English, with folk songs from each country woven in seamlessly.

Opera North's performance of *Silent Night* was a semi-staged production in Leeds Town Hall's cavernous concert hall, dominated by towering organ pipes. The director, Tim Albery, used the space brilliantly. The timpani were placed on two platforms, high above the rest of the orchestra. The latter was seated in three slightly sunken areas of the platform, intersected by two wooden pathways reminiscent of the duckboard used by soldiers on the battle field. The only props were two benches on either side of the stage, representing the trenches of the French and Scottish troops. The German soldiers were higher up, just below the organ bench. The whole setting had a make-shift character that suited the opera's theme.

The absence of a proscenium arch gave a heightened sense of immediacy to the performance. The singers had no hiding place. A large chorus of soldiers, formed by Opera North's chorus, and students of the Royal Northern College of Music, Opera North's Youth Chorus and Community Singers, were close at hand and we could watch their every expression. The orchestra's presence on stage made them, along with the audience, close witnesses of the events.

When the lights go up, it is August 1914, in a Berlin opera house where Anna Sorensen (Maire Flavin) and Nikolaus Sprink (Rupert Charlesworth) are about to perform. A messenger appears on stage and whispers to the conductor, “War has been declared.” Suddenly everything changes and Sprink must go.

The scene changes to December. War has been raging for five months during which the British Expeditionary Force alone has lost

nearly 100,000 men.

French, Scottish and German troops appear at the back of the stage, making their way toward the trenches. The hall darkens and the battle begins. The orchestra becomes a battlefield with timpani on either side bellowing out their cacophonous noise—raucous trumpets and trombones, growling tubas, discordant blasts, whistles, flutes, shrieking strings.

Suddenly, we see the projected images of hundreds of soldiers, emerging from the trenches, running high across the stage wall, over the curve of the organ pipes, making them appear almost three-dimensional. The music is deafening and genuinely frightening. As the music subsides, the shadowy figures slow till there are just one or two soldiers returning to the safety of their trenches. What has happened? How many are dead? From here the story unfolds.

All the soldiers want is sleep. A French officer, Lieutenant Audebert (Quirijn de Lang), sorrowfully lists the names of his men killed or wounded. He is an unwilling participant in the war and longs for home, having left behind his wife who was on the point of giving birth.

Over in the Scottish trench, the soldiers fantasise about “bed, bath and meal.” One of them speaks for all when he sings “Maybe when I wake up all will be changed.” The snow falls and everything is still. But one young soldier, Jonathan Dale (Alex Banfield), grieves over his brother, whom he was forced to leave dying on the battlefield. Father Palmer (Adrian Clarke), an Anglican priest, attempts to comfort him, but Dale swears revenge on the enemy.

Running through the opera is the story of the couple, Anna and Nikolaus. Anna has now been invited to sing for the German *Kronprinz* (Crown Prince), the son of the *Kaiser*, in a nearby castle and manages to reach the front to see her lover. There were indeed such women who, incredibly, braved the dangers of war to spend a few hours with their loved ones. Nikolaus sadly tells her that he can never return to his old life. He curses the officers, “slugging whisky and making jokes while the men are dying.”

But it's Christmas, and comforts arrive for all the troops—Christmas trees and cigars for the Germans, cigarettes and wine for the French and whisky for the Scots. All is quiet when suddenly, in a heart-stopping moment, the German soldiers begin to raise their Christmas trees above the trenches. Nikolaus bravely climbs above the parapet and begins to sing.

Slowly the singing is taken up. A ghostly piper appears at the top of

the steps playing a Scottish folk song, *Many the miles* and the soldiers join in. But Jonathan is unmoved. He swears to make the Germans pay for his brother's death, "even if I have to murder every last one of them."

The soldiers call to each other across No Man's Land. They emerge from the trenches to shake hands and embrace, showing photos and exchanging gifts as the officers tell each other that the cease-fire is "for one night only."

Amid a scene of carnage, the men face the terrible task of burying their dead. They gather together to pray for their fallen comrades—not the sickening prayers of the Armistice Day ceremonies of the last hundred years, but a heartfelt lament. The first act ends when the drums roll out the sound of a distant battle and the men look out above the audience with faces expressing horror and dread.

The second act begins on Christmas Day to the sound of a simple solo flute. The soldiers are out in No Man's Land collecting identification papers from the bodies of dead soldiers before they are buried.

Suddenly a British major (Dean Robinson), the German *Kronprinz* (Tim Ochala-Greenough) and a French general (Stephen Richardson) rush on to the stage and vie with one another in condemning what is taking place. To the sounds of brass and drums they bellow, "It's disgraceful!" "Despicable!" "Unthinkable!" "Scandalous!" "They are no less than traitors!" "This is not how war is waged!" "Measures must be taken to ensure this will not happen again!"

Their fulminations are interrupted by a huge cheer from the troops who are encouraging their teams in a football match. But measures are taken, and the men are ordered back to their respective trenches. In the melee of handshakes and goodbyes, on Anna's insistence, she and Nikolaus slip into the French trenches and ask to be taken prisoner. His hatred for the war is expressed in an outburst to one of his comrades. He tells him, "You are an utter idiot if you believe you are serving your dear 'Fatherland.' You are serving the Junkers! It is all about power and money!"

Once below their parapets, the men refuse to fire on each other. All except one, Jonathan Dale, who obeys an order to shoot, hitting a figure in a German overcoat crossing towards the French lines. It is Ponchel (Geoffrey Dolton), Lieutenant Audebert's batman, who borrowed a German uniform so that he could pass behind their lines to have coffee with his mother, who lives a few miles away. Before Ponchel dies, he tells Audebert that he is the father of a baby son.

Discipline is restored. Orders are given. The German regiment will be transferred to the Russian front. The French are ordered to the front at Verdun. The Scottish regiment will be disbanded "by order of His Majesty the King!"

Father Palmer is told by a visiting bishop that he is to be sent back to England and will probably be excommunicated.

Snow begins to fall once more as the men walk wearily up the steps and disappear behind the organ, quietly humming together. A few notes sound on the harp and five dead soldiers—Scottish, French and German—rise and face the audience like ghostly sentinels. Slowly, the image of a huge gun appears above them. It is not pointing toward No Man's Land. It is pointing straight at us sitting in the auditorium. The message is clear ... Time is short. Learn the lessons, not just of World War I, but of the whole of the 20th century. It was a brilliant production, superbly performed and it left the audience with much to think about.

Similar cease-fires, like the famous Christmas Eve truce, involved up to two-thirds of the troops along the battlefields of the Western

Front. The ~~General Staff~~ *General Staff* on ~~all~~ *all* sides thought the Christmas truce was catastrophic. "Some thought it was becoming the international convention of the trenches," observed *Joyeux Noel's* director, Carion.

The events depicted are of great historical significance. Fraternisation among soldiers broke out just a few months after the leading parties of the Second International—with the exception of the Bolsheviks—voted for government war credits to support the war. Karl Kautsky and the Social Democratic Party of Germany insisted it was necessary to act "in defence of the fatherland" and leaders of the British Labour Party and French Socialists did likewise. This was a betrayal of the anti-war manifesto they had signed together at the Basle Congress only two years before, which committed them to oppose the approaching war, declaring: "It would be a crime for workers to shoot each other down"

Lenin described these gentlemen as lackeys of the bourgeoisie whose fundamental principle was "fear of revolution." On hearing the news of the 1914 Christmas truce from the front, Lenin wrote: "Try to imagine [Second International traitors] Hyndman, Guesde, Vandervelde, Plekhanov, Kautsky and the rest—instead of aiding the bourgeoisie (something they are now engaged in)—forming an international committee to agitate for 'fraternisation and attempts to establish friendly relations' between the socialists of the belligerent countries, both in the 'trenches' and among the troops in general. What would the results be several months from now, if today, only six months after the outbreak of the war and despite all the political bosses, leaders and luminaries who have betrayed socialism, opposition is mounting on all sides against those who have voted for war credits and those who have accepted ministerial jobs, and the military authorities who are threatening that 'fraternisation' carries the death sentence?"

Lenin wrote that for Kautsky there was only one practical issue, "victory or defeat for one's country." He continued, "However, if one does not lose sight of socialism, that is untrue. Then there is another practical issue: should we perish as blind and helpless slaves, in a war between slave-holders, or should we fall in 'attempts at fraternisation' between the slaves, with the aim of casting off slavery? Such, in reality, is the 'practical' issue."

Ten million soldiers died in the conflict.

To be continued

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