

Blitz spirit helps Flight take

MUSIC

Scottish Opera: Flight

Usher Hall, Edinburgh



There was a palpable sense of Blitz spirit at what ended up as Scottish Opera's sole Edinburgh outing for Jonathan Dove's *Flight* – a feeling that the show must go on, in defiance of the continuing snow chaos. In his impromptu introduction, Scottish Opera general director Alex Reedijk even talked of the company's 'super-determination' to perform, following two cancellations.

It was a spirit that brought an unusual sense of community across both the audience, who'd struggled in through slowly melting snow, and the performers on stage. There were fewer spectators than no doubt hoped for, and far fewer musicians in the pit, too. Deciding it was unwise to summon the orchestral musicians from right across the Central Belt, accompaniment duties were entrusted sole-

ly to Jonathon Swinard on piano – who deservedly got the biggest cheer of the evening.

There were inevitably moments where Swinard's piano accompaniment lacked the power and colour of Dove's intended orchestration – notably in the surging storm that runs through *Flight*'s second act. But he gave a heroic performance, ably dodging his way through Dove's tricky post-minimalist rhythms, and touchingly sensitive in the show's more reflective moments. Indeed, the solo piano only added to the sense of intimacy that pervaded the whole evening, which made Dove and librettist April De Angelis's bittersweet tale of bickering couples and a stranded refugee all the more poignant.

That emotional honesty was emphasised by director Stephen Barlow's nimble, beautifully detailed production, one that mined the show's comic corners while never shying away from its underlying sadness. Countertenor James Laing was remarkable as the Refugee, trapped

in the airport as he awaits the brother he knows has perished on their traumatic journey, with a gloriously focused, sharply etched voice and a convincing balance of swagger and vulnerability.

Jennifer France was similarly remarkable as the otherworldly Controller, surveying proceedings with an air of disdain, and bringing ecstatic abandon to Dove's stratospheric vocal lines.

Among the rest of the strong cast, Marie McLaughlin simmered her way through Dove's purring lines as the lonely 52-year-old vainly expecting the arrival of her twentysomething fiancé, while Victoria Simmonds was compelling as the diplomat's wife.

Designer Andrew Riley's evocative staging emphasised the production's already sharp definition, which also brought Dove and De Angelis's themes of hope and compassion to brilliant life – even, at this particular performance, against the odds.

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