

# Extended Intervals

Our roving critic takes in a memorable seaside concert in Italy, some Gavin Bryars in a London church, and a new opera in Surrey

**Y**ou expect Italian music festivals to come with a degree of chaos, and a new one last month in Liguria was no exception. Based in an enchanting seaside town called Lerici and run by Gianluca Marciano, who conducts for Grange Park Opera, the finale was supposed to be a grand orchestral concert on a floating stage just out to sea. It would have been spectacular, except that nobody had checked with Health and Safety. And two days before the concert, Health and Safety weighed with an irrefutable Italian-bureaucratic 'non'.

Given that this stretch of coast is where the poet Shelley drowned, you can appreciate their caution. And as things turned out, it wasn't a disaster. Everything just relocated to the beach; and in the magic of a starlit bay with a forbidding castle that apparently provided Mary Shelley with the inspiration for where Frankenstein would make his monster, it was fabulous enough. That it began an hour or so late, thanks to the surprise arrival of a church procession up and down the seafront with a statue of the Virgin Mary and a brass band, hardly mattered either. Marciano's orchestra – ad hoc, young, largely Russian as it seemed – was good, and turned in an impressive open-air *Scheherazade* that just finished as the chimes of midnight struck.

Next year he plans to fly in something from the Grange Park season, introducing

English country-opera to a land where such things don't exist yet. Where exactly it will happen isn't fixed. But there's a little park beside the villa where the Shelleys lived: a villa from whose windows Mary would have scanned the ocean, waiting anxiously for Percy's boat to come back, as it never would. The story is the stuff of opera. Grange Park should commission it.

Back in the 1970s Gavin Bryars happened to be in the right place at the right time with a microphone and taped a homeless man – a tramp as we'd have said in those less careful times – crooning a ditty about Jesus' blood never failing him (with the proviso, yet). Transferred to a repeating loop, accompanied by live acoustic instruments, it touched the nerve and maybe conscience of an audience beyond the small world of experimental music. And more than half a century on, it was the star turn in one of Bryars' rare UK appearances with his own band – at the Heath Street Baptist Church in Hampstead (where they have a lot of concerts these days; the minister tells me he's bidding to make it 'The Musicians' Church' now that St Sepulchre's Holborn has gone evangelical and philistine). I'm bound to say the endless repetition of the loop does test your patience: every time feels like it has to be the last – and usually it isn't.

But surrender to it like a mantra, and you find that *Jesus' Blood* has potency. It sent the man in front of me to sleep, which was miraculous given the hardness of the pews at Heath St Holborn's. Happy-clappies, who appear to think they have a special claim on miracles, should take note.

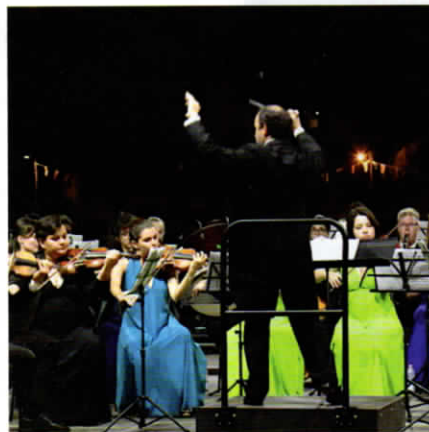
Redhill somehow doesn't strike you as a place where operas premiere, still less an opera about interracial gay love with a text by Stephen Fry and the requirement for a largely black cast (since the setting is colonial Africa). But Redhill is where Surrey Opera premiered *The Life To Come*, a piece based on one of E M Forster's under-the-counter stories with music (shamelessly lyrical, somewhere between Britten, Walton and the West End) by Louis Mander. And it was a joy – not least for the experience of so many amateur black singers throwing themselves heart and soul into an operatic score that wasn't *Porgy and Bess*. How Surrey Opera got them all on board I've no idea, but they were brilliant and gave good support to the show's star, Themba Mvula. A (professional) young baritone who showed real promise, he was elegant, assured and commanding. That he also showed some bottom – playing as he did a tribal chief – caused a sensation in the audience. Seems it isn't only opera they don't get much of in Redhill. 🍷

▼ Potent music: Gavin Bryars

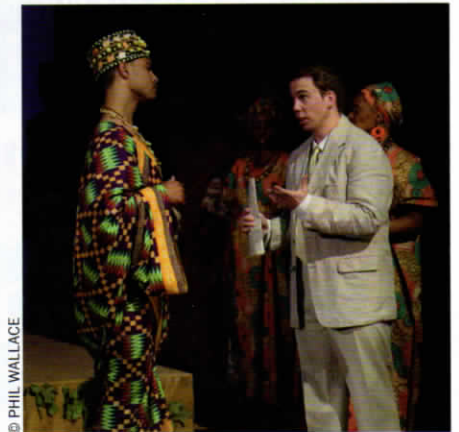


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▼ Seaside success: the finale of *Suoni dal Golfo*



▼ A joy: *The Life to Come*



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