

THE STAGE

by Edward Bhesania - Dec 3, 2018

Silent Night review at Leeds Town Hall – ‘involving and thought-provoking’



Silent

Night at Leeds Town Hall. Photo: Tristram Kenton

With only a month to go before 2019, the centenary of the 1918 Armistice is marked in operatic form with this widely travelled production based on Christian Carion's 2005 film *Joyeux Noel*, inspired by the Christmas truce of 1914.

The opera's prologue effectively sets up the action as war is declared mid-performance at a Berlin opera house – conductor and orchestra immediately become part of the story. The singer Sprink joins up, as do individuals in a Paris apartment and a remote Scottish church. They leave their loved ones with a mix of loyalty and misplaced fearlessness.

The rest of the action takes place on the Western Front, colourfully recalling the horrors of trench warfare, the danger of instigating the truce, the personal stories of those representing all sides and, after news of the truce has reached disapproving commanders, the continuation of fighting.

Tim Albery manages to tell the story vividly despite almost no space for staging – a couple of benches in front of the orchestra, and a couple of extended aisles between sections of players. Still, this makes Hannah Clark's costumes, lovingly detailed and aged, and Thomas C Hase's lighting come into their own. Video projections of First World War footage have to contend with the ornate profile of the Town Hall's organ pipes acting as a screen.

It perhaps takes a while to get a grip on the characters, since they pale into insignificance against the enormity of the conflict, but Kevin Puts' music is extremely effective, if somewhat restricted in stylistic range. A strong Opera North cast does the company credit and the production is well finessed and considered. It's an involving and thought-provoking experience.

Photos: Tristram Kenton

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Verdict

Judicious retelling of a slim but remarkable chapter of the First World War