

**Opera on the Fringe**  
**The Juniper Tree**  
Opera at Broomhill, Kent, July 27

For his second opera (the first was *Ubu*, last year), Andrew Toovey turned to the Grimm tale *The Juniper Tree*—of which Philip Glass and Robert Moran, co-composers, made an opera much praised and much played in America. (The premiere, in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1985, was produced by Serban, designed by Michael Yeargan.) It's a tale calling for music, propelled by the song of a magic bird that appears in the juniper tree when Ann-Marie lays her stepbrother's bones in its shade. She has collected the bones from the remnants of her father's meal. He's been smacking his lips over a delicious stew. And a wicked stepmother has stewed the boy to conceal her murder of him. Glass and Moran, in their 115-minute opera, kept Grimm's full cast, with the first wife, and the three artisans with their gifts to the bird of golden chain, red slippers, and the millstone that at last crushes the cruel stepmother; and they added a chorus. Toovey and his librettist, Dic Edwards, condense things to a 40-minute chamber opera for just four singers.

Father, Son/Bird, Stepmother, Daughter—and seven players. The triple ritual of folk tales is lost, but the rest is there: paedophagy, metempsychosis, resurrection, evergreen, ever-renewing Nature, stepmother hatred, murder, an ambivalent father-figure, brother-sister love mixed with guilt --- the trials and puzzles and consolations of life for which nursery Grimm—in days before nursery books were 'politically corrected'—prepared one.

Toovey tells the tale without trying to 'explain' it (though he and Edwards, kind souls, add the possibility of redemption-through-love and forgiveness for the stepmother, who is allowed to survive). He presents it keenly, heightened by tautly composed, vivid, engaging music: as direct in its melodic contours as a folk tale yet subtle in its scoring and its rhythms. The opera had its premiere in the Victorian theatre of Broomhill, David Solomon's house between Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells, where opera in Kent starts to live again after the Arts Council assassination of Kent Opera. (The Broomhill season began with *Dido*, and by the time this appears *La serva padrona*, *The Beggar's Opera*, and *Ariadne* al.J Naxos will also have been done; Anne Evans, John Mark Ainsley, and Russell Smythe gave recitals.) It was a workshop, score-held, but enacted performance—produced by Stephen Langridge and conducted by Charles Hazlewood, with his EOS ensemble, and given by singers and players who brought the opera to life vividly. Anne-Margaret Cameron, the Daughter, was fresh and steady and charming through all the range. Nicholas Hariades, son and bird, making his stage debut, was a remarkable young male soprano—fleet, steady, not hooty but gleaming. These are two singers I look forward to hearing again. Mary King was a passionate, exact Stepmother, Keel Watson a jovial Father. The singers were not yet confident enough to ignore the bar-lines and play Toovey's free verbal stresses against the notated metre (Hariades, with choral experience of Tudor music, came closest), but one made allowance for that.

Broomhill commissioned the piece. This was a try-out, with a full production in prospect. The *Juniper Tree* deserves one. My suggestions would be reconsideration of a few lines, where diction becomes fancy in the wrong sort of way (e.g the stepmother's "Who am I to compete with the devil's own deep privilege of these mystical forces?") and some episodes of more rapid pulse in the moving final sequences.

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