Opera Review

South Pole. Opera by Miroslav Srnka (composer) and Tom Holloway (librettist), performed by the Bavarian State Orchestra, conducted by Kirill Petrenko. Director: Hans Neuenfels. Stage set: Katrin Connan, Hans Neuenfels. Cast: Rolando Villazón, Thomas Hampson, Tara Erraught, Mojca Erdmann, Dean Power, Tim Kuypers, Kevin Conners, John Carpenter, Matthew Grills, Christian Rieger, Joshua Owen Mills, Sean Michael Plumb. Premiere at the Bavarian State Opera, Munich, on 31 January 2016: viewed at the final dress rehearsal on 30 January.

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The set design for the Bavarian State Opera's new commission *South Pole* (2016) is simple but stunning: a white backdrop featuring a square, bisected diagonally, with a stark black 'X' at its centre. Viewed straight on, it appears a flat map with 'X' marking the ultimate prize of the South Pole sought by both the Captain Scott's British *Terra Nova* expedition, and Roald Amundsen's Norwegian *Fram* expedition. Viewed from the side, its meaning deepens: the square now appears hollowed and inverted, becoming the four walls of a tent where an X marks the apex. Seen like this, the 'X' becomes the symbol simultaneously of triumph and tragedy: Amundsen's global prize, and one of the last sights the dying Scott ever saw before expiring in his tent on the Antarctic ice barrier.

In a satisfying parallel, the first operatic adaptation of Scott's last expedition was also German. Focusing solely on the late arrival and later deaths of the British expedition, Winfried Zillig's 1937 atonal opera *Das Opfer* [*The Sacrifice*] centred on the British Captain Oates and his famous decision to 'go outside' in a blizzard, in the hope of allowing his comrades to reach safety without him. (Unfortunately, *Das Opfer*'s experimental approach has made the work somewhat notorious: the unfolding tragic drama of Scott's polar party was not well served by a singing and dancing 'Pinguinchor' [chorus of penguins] providing a commentary on their sad fate.) Czech composer Miroslav Srnka and Australian-British librettist Tom Holloway were inspired by the victorious Amundsen rather than Scott in choosing to tackle this subject-matter, and their new jointly-written opera *South Pole* is a side-by-side treatment of both expeditions, from the beginning (where Amundsen belatedly announces his intentions) to the end, showing Scott's death and Amundsen's safe return in triumph.

South Pole is ambitious in scope, and the composer Srnka's largely atonal music is characterized by orchestral complexity. Certain passages convey the harshness and driving force of the southernmost continent: however, in my opinion the Antarctic setting also cries out for striking musical instrumentation, a way of expressing that inhuman beauty thrillingly in sound. Srnka does not quite express Antarctica's remote chill in this work, but his music nonetheless aims for dramatic effect. Meanwhile, Holloway's English-language libretto is an elegant piece of structuralism, presenting the two parallel expeditions operating side-by-side on a bare white split stage. The expeditions never meet physically, but provide chorus and counterpoint dramatically as well as musically.

To the left is the British expedition led by Scott (Rolando Villazón), to the right the Norwegian expedition led by Amundsen (Thomas Hampson). The opening gives Amundsen's belated notification in a telegram to Scott that he is heading for the south pole rather than the north, and that Scott must now consider himself in a 'race' for the prize. The opening conjures up two very similar worlds, each characterised by rough masculine humour. However, the costuming rejects such comparison, emphasising difference and clearly signalling to the audience the 'heroes' and 'villains' of the piece: the Norwegians are clad in lustrous silver-grey furs, the British in sinister black oilskins.

As the opera's Amundsen, the baritone Hampson sings well: in contrast to the warmth of his voice, he cuts an imperious and often icy presence on stage. However, he is still undoubtedly the 'hero' of proceedings, with the 'villain's' role given to Scott. In giving the Scott of his opera an invented motivation of unfounded jealousy towards his wife, the librettist Holloway appears to be placing him in the tradition of jealous operatic tenor roles such as Canio in *Pagliacci* or Don José in *Carmen* (the latter referenced with José's aria '*La fleur que tu m'avais jetée'* playing on the British gramophone). Villazón, himself a noted Don José with the Berlin State Opera, accordingly strikes a note of vulnerability and self-destructive passion in his portrayal.

Into this all-male world, at the mid-point of the journey south, come two visions of very different women to haunt the expedition leaders: Scott's sophisticated wife Kathleen (Tara Erraught), elegant in a full-length black dress, and Amundsen's lost love 'The Landlady' (Mojca Erdmann), a childlike figure in a plain white shift. The conception of the youthful and passionate Landlady is the most dramatic, and in my view the most impressive, aspect of the opera. The soprano Erdmann sings with a strikingly pure tone and presents a character both pitiful and chilling, whose every appearance grows increasingly ominous as she begins to torment Amundsen with the most painful regret of his past.

The creativity of the piece is evident: however, as this is a research journal, I must make a few comments on the historicity of this opera, especially as it is evident that Holloway and Snrka have been influenced by the 'revisionist history' of polar exploration. Revisionist polar historians, influenced by the 'just-world fallacy', have tended to base their judgment of events, and the figures involved in them, solely on outcome. 'Success' is presented as having been won by flawless behaviour, whereas 'failure', according to this approach, must be the result of personal error. This retrospective approach may provide a satisfying narrative, but it disregards both the very existence of luck and those factors out of the primary figures' control.

Also, the revisionists' small but frequent factual inaccuracies have the cumulative effect of building a misleading impression of Scott and his expedition. For example, Scott, a naval officer with an objectively excellent professional record (Lewis and May 2013), has had his naval record inexplicably misrepresented as incompetent. Scott's judgements, which were entirely understandable within their historical context, are

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isolated from that context and condemned from the comfort of modern hindsight. Scott left written orders for his returning polar party to be intercepted on their return from the pole by British dog-teams, but revisionists seriously misrepresented his 'safety-net' for decades (May 2012). Scott supported his injured men Evans and Oates even at the cost of his own safety and survival, but has been presented as lacking morals or integrity. In the words of polar explorer and writer Sir Ranulph Fiennes, who has tackled the problem of revisionist misrepresentations in his own Scott biography (Fiennes 2004), 'The fabrications and distortions of historic facts used to achieve the volte-face of Scott's international reputation would have been worthy of the KGB's top disinformation experts' (Fiennes 2003: 118).

As a contrast with this presentation of Scott, one usually finds the revisionist presentation of Amundsen to be one of a positive and likeable personality with a uniformly successful career. In reality Amundsen could be cold-hearted towards both his employees and those closest to him, and, contrary to the popular stereotype, Amundsen's expeditions were neither uniformly successful nor free of errors or fatalities (for example, see Amundsen's ill-considered final flight in 1928, which resulted in six deaths including his own (May and Lewis 2013)). To elaborate on a single (thankfully non-fatal) error, in 1911 Amundsen left one man, Kristian Prestrud, behind on the Great Ice Barrier after his polar party's first 'false start' to the pole, and the frostbitten Prestrud was unable to get back to base unaided. His colleague Hjalmar Johansen stayed behind on the ice to help Prestrud home. On his return, Johansen understandably criticised Amundsen, who responded by cutting Johansen out of the expedition altogether.

The librettist Holloway, having initially believed the sweetened image of Amundsen found in revisionist literature, has described his disillusionment as he encountered the historical Amundsen in other books and in Amundsen's own journals (Holloway 2015). Given his experience with the revisionists' unreliability, it is a pity that Holloway nonetheless chose to perpetuate their misleading dichotomy in his libretto. Holloway's Scott is still allowed no merit, and, while Holloway's Amundsen has had some of his historical coldness restored, the narrative is still slanted in his favour. For example, in the opera's version of Amundsen's too-early 'false start', the Prestrud incident is omitted. (With all of Amundsen's men presented as arriving back safe and well, Johansen's anger at Amundsen now appears an unreasonable over-reaction, which in turn helps explain and even justify Amundsen's harsh treatment of Johansen at the end of the opera.) Furthermore, the creation of a persecuting demon for Amundsen, the 'Landlady', presents Amundsen as possessing sufficient compassion to be stricken with inward remorse for a youthful mistake: this fictional context of Amundsen's being troubled and distracted by regret provides an implicitly sympathetic explanation for any errors or poor behaviour.

Ultimately, in dramatic terms, the easiest way to make the icy and remote Amundsen appear attractive is to present Amundsen's rivals as so unsympathetic that the audience is given no option but to root for Amundsen by default. Clothe the British in oily black; omit the fact that the British also brought dogs on their expedition, like the Norwegians; give the British expedition members only problems and failings, to contrast with Amundsen's intriguing mixture of light and shadow. The opera has gone to a lot of trouble to sway the audience's opinion with its use of artistic devices. However, with this borne in mind, one must still admire the level of technical expertise that has gone into this production. An audience fully aware of the degree of artistic license taken will still appreciate its handsome design, its creativity and the many strong vocal performances. (Karen May, karenmay31@gmail.com)

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