

Benjamin Britten – Albert Herring (2012)

Written by bluesever

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1. Intro 5:01 2. Act I 55:16 3. Intermezzo 24:31 4. Act II 54:11 5. Act III 35:59

Christine Brewer (Lady Billows) Alek Shrader (Albert Herring) Daniela Mack (Nancy) Liam Bonner (Sid) Ronnita Nicole Miller (Florence Pike) Los Angeles Opera Orchestra & Choir
James Conlon – conductor

Los Angeles Opera's production of Benjamin Britten's "Albert Herring," which opened at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion Saturday night, is full of fun. The music making, highlighted by James Conlon's vital conducting, is, for the most part, excellent. Will that make a comic opera that spoofs village life in Edwardian England any less a hard sell? Maybe.

The show, as it is, is worth seeing (unfortunately, a special on \$25 seats that was a three-day deal last week has already come and gone). Still, Paul Curran's farcical production, imported from Santa Fe Opera, is also a lost opportunity to explore a little more deeply a remarkable red "Herring."

"Albert Herring" is very funny, but it is not a farce," Conlon notes in the L.A. Opera program book. The opera, which had its premiere in 1947, is the tale of a mama's boy crowned May King when no girl in a small East Suffolk town (not unlike the one Britten himself grew up in) can be found who meets the puritanical standards of purity set by the impossibly autocratic Lady Billows.

That, along with the help of some spiked lemonade, is enough to send Albert on a bender, to the shock and horror of proper townsfolk. Was a coming-of-age opera written to feature Britten's companion, tenor Peter Pears, also a subtext for a coming-out opera? Those who understand

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Britten's operas best, particularly the critic Andrew Porter and the musicologist Philip Brett, have said it is. "Herring" has, in fact, long been recognized as a comic companion to "Peter Grimes" and "Billy Budd," great Britten operas that underscore the tragic consequences that commonly face the outsider in conventional societies. Movingly, the consequences of Albert's finding himself are left up in the air. A sequel could end rather badly.

If Curran underscores jokiness, he is given plenty of opportunity for that in Eric Crozier's libretto -- "literary failings, though regrettable, can't keep a good opera down," Porter once wrote of "Herring." Curran underscores the obvious. Slapstick gestures explicate sexual innuendos. Albert is treated as a twit, Monty Python worthy. The upright citizens -- vicar, mayor, teacher, cop -- are cartoon characters. A nice touch, though, is turning Lady Billows' pompous maid, Florence, into a bit of a rebel herself.

A director's task here is not easy. "Herring" is a chamber opera, with an orchestra of 13. Kevin Knight's cheerfully cheap-looking small set, with its miniature houses, takes up only part of the large Chandler stage. Subtlety is inevitably lost when an opera written for a 600-seat house is transferred to one five times that size.

Curran clearly needs at least some exaggeration to reach the audience beyond the first few rows, and he tells the story well. He does suggest that Albert's breakout has elements of disturbing psychological breakdown, which might have been more touching were he not quite such a silly thing. But the underlying darkness in "Herring" is mostly rejected here for surface light.

The cast is winning, especially Alek Shrader's brightly sung and enthusiastic Herring. Ronnita Nicole Miller's droll Florence comes close to stealing the show. Another nice touch is that rather than exaggerating Lady Billows' grandiosity, Janis Kelly hints, Joan Crawford-like, at a slightly sinister side to her character (the Wagnerian soprano Christine Brewer, who was a hit in Santa Fe, will sing the role for the last two performances).

Jonathan Michie (Mr. Gedge, the vicar), Stacey Tappan (Miss Wordsworth, the teacher), Robert McPherson (Mr. Upfold, the mayor) and a hilariously booming Richard Bernstein (Police Superintendent Budd) lay it on thick but provide splendid ensemble singing. The young lovers, a sensual Daniela Mack (Nancy, the bakery girl) and a spry Liam Bonner (Sid, a butcher's assistant), light up the stage as they lead Albert astray.

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Jane Bunnell (Albert's mother) is a battle-ax who sentimentally softens at the end. Erin Sanzero, Jamie-Rose Guarrine and Caleb Glickman (the village scamps) were boisterously annoying; they were supposed to be. I wonder, though, whether all the singers weren't forced to push, since the sets lacked proper reflecting surfaces.

The virtuoso chamber ensemble, sunk in a pit, was at an equal acoustical disadvantage. The wittiest -- and most elevating -- aspects of "Herring" are found in the detailed instrumental writing, much of it solo. Conlon urged projection, and surprisingly little was lost. The exceptionally fine playing was reason alone to overlook Curran's shortcomings. ---Los Angeles Times

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