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# A lockdown performance that puts rival companies to shame

Opera

## Miss Havisham's Wedding Night

Grange Park Opera

★★★★★

By Rupert Christiansen

Wasfi Kani, the formidable founder director of Grange Park Opera, deserves a medal for showing her competitors what is creatively possible at this stage of lockdown. Her summer festival may have been cancelled but, nothing daunted, she has commissioned a month of original programming, including recitals by Bryn Terfel and Simon Keenlyside recorded in their Welsh homes, as well as opening her beautiful theatre in the grounds of West Horsley Place in rural Surrey for a series of socially distanced audience-less concerts and performances of small-scale opera. Others in her field have rather lazily been content to stream existing commercial videos and ask for donations: Kani has been braver and more enterprising – and when this horror is over, I am

sure that she will emerge a winner. Last week, soprano Claire Booth and pianist Christopher Glynn gave a scoldingly intense performance of *La Voix Humaine*, a monodrama by Jean Cocteau set to music by Poulenc, in which a suicidal woman struggles over the telephone to keep her faithless lover from abandoning her.

This week, we have another monodrama for soprano and piano on broadly the same theme: *Miss Havisham's Wedding Night*, based on the spectral character in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, with music by the contemporary American composer Dominick Argento (who died last year) and a text by John Olon-Scrymgeour. It lasts about half an hour and takes place in the room in which Miss Havisham was jilted: having smashed the clocks, blocked out the light and vowed never to remove her bridal dress, she goes mad, obsessively reliving her anticipation of marital happiness and the traumatic receipt of the letter from her fiancé Compeyson calling it all off. Finally, she fantasises what life would have been like had their relationship flourished.

The piece is basically an extract from an unsuccessful full-length opera *Miss Havisham's Fire* that Argento wrote as a vehicle for the great soprano Beverly Sills: as befits Miss

Havisham's mental state, the idiom is fiercely angular and fragmented, with episodes of pastiche reminiscent of the style of Peter Maxwell Davies (who coincidentally also composed a monodrama, *Miss Donmithorne's Maggot*, based on the story of the Australian woman who inspired Dickens to create Miss Havisham).

It makes for challenging rather than easy listening, but the adventurous will find it well worth sticking with – and the performers at Grange Park interpret it with compelling intensity in an imaginative staging directed by Ralph Bridle, adapted from the version seen at the Arcola Theatre's Grimeborn Festival last summer.

Here as then, Sarah Minns is the singer, with David Eaton her excellent pianist: it's hard to imagine anyone doing it better – singing and acting with admirable security and confidence, Minns suggests both the hopeful young woman and the embittered old crone, capturing all the character's volatile emotions without excessive histrionics or distortion of musical values. Apparently filmed in one take on a fixed steadycam, this is a haunting depiction of a woman on the edge.

Streamed free at [grangeparkopera.co.uk](http://grangeparkopera.co.uk)

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Compelling intensity: soprano Sarah Minns plays Dickens's jilted bride Miss Havisham

RICHARD LEWISOHN