

**Stephen Joseph Award:**  
**Belfast Ensemble Nomination:**

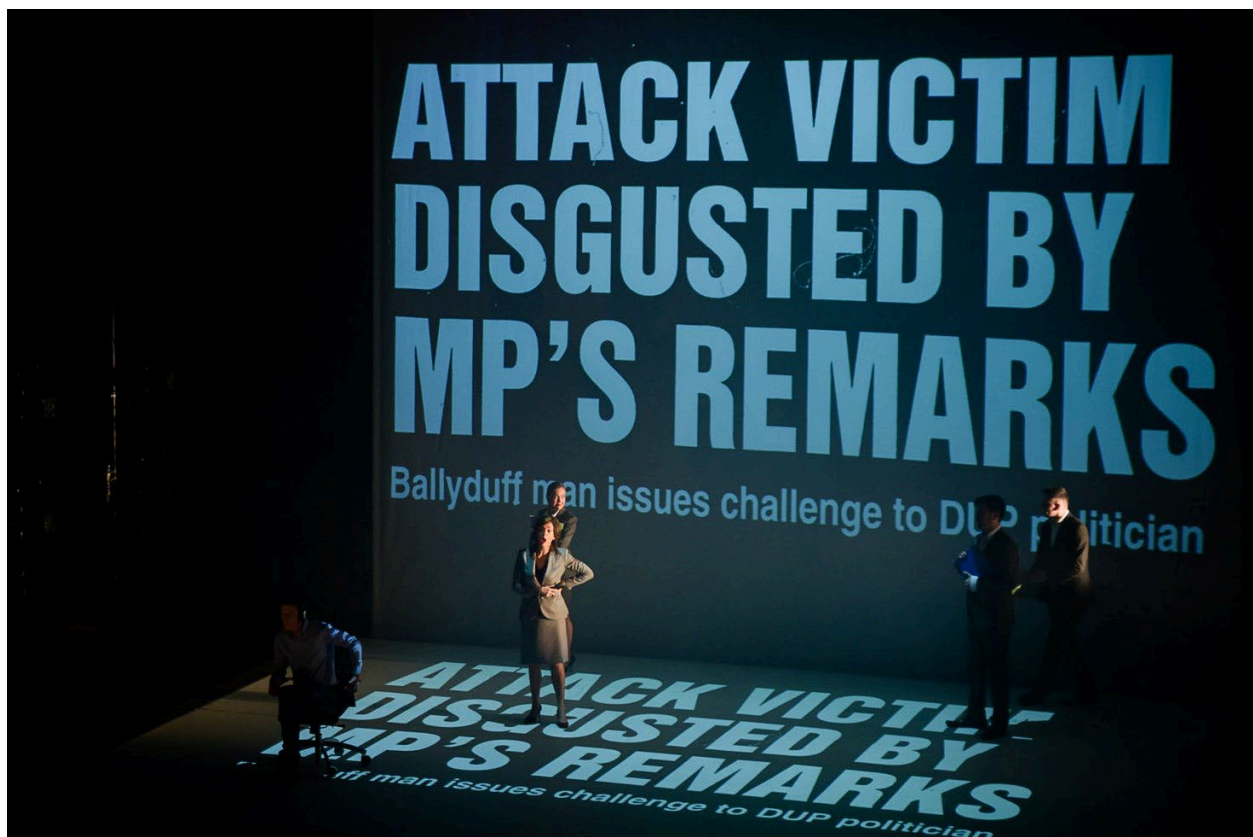
My name is Chris Thompson, a Belfast-based freelance creative who works in the TV and film industry. I have never worked for the Belfast Ensemble, but I would like to put them forward for this award. They are dragging Belfast (sometimes kicking and often screaming) into the 21st century and doing what artists are supposed to do – challenging society, while also using modern production values and innovations to invigorate traditional mediums.

I am generally not a fan of opera so when I was invited to see "Abomination" I thought I was going to hate it. In fact, I loved every minute of it, from the incredible projections and lighting to Rebecca Caine spouting homophobic poison as Iris Robinson (all quoted and 'on the record') in the most beautiful soprano voice. This was knowing and funny, but more importantly, it made me really think about the DUP and what a struggle it is to have those kinds of beliefs and hold office.

'Mass' was also this fantastic immersive experience. The orchestra literally produced a drum machine sound. It was, weirdly, like being in a club, but with flashing images of Jesus and drag queens disorientating everyone, and then there was a surprise choir, in amongst everyone, lone voices uniting everyone. What a moment !

This is a company that's been making weird and wonderful work for a while. As an artist myself (albeit in a different form), I can see how special this is for Belfast. They deserve to be recognised.

**Chris Thompson: Artist and Filmmaker**



## **Belfast Ensemble Seconder, Kate Guelke.**

The Belfast Ensemble has been making extraordinary, experimental musical work since 2017. The company has made a speciality of immersive, in-the-round experiences that challenge audiences; projects like 'MASS', a major multi-disciplinary event combining video projection and the Ulster Orchestra in a spectacular sound and light show in the Belfast Telegraph Building, have proved the power of unconventional approaches to music theatre ('Best of 2021' UK Selection, The Stage). Likewise, the company's commitment to collaborative ensemble practice has resulted in exciting new pieces like verbatim docu-opera 'Abomination – A DUP Opera' (Ivor Novello nominated, Irish Times Theatre Awards 'Best Opera', Classical Pick 2019 \*\*\*\*\* The Guardian).

The company also actively contributes to its local community. 'Intermezzo', a 'music in the workplace programme', won the company an 'Arts and Business NI' award, while the company's forays into creating work for children – such as children's chamber opera The Musician – have resulted in national acclaim (\*\*\*\* Opera) and international connections (Cologne Opera will stage the opera next season).

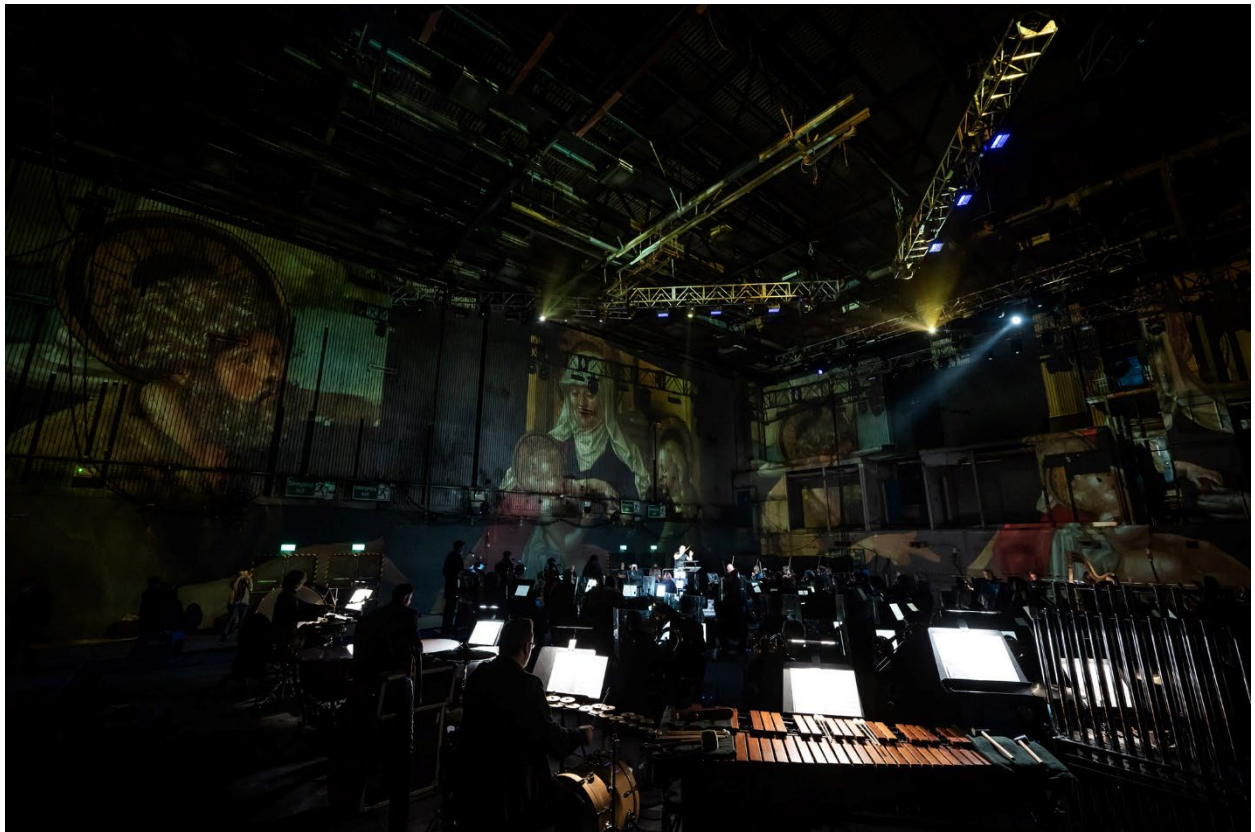
The Belfast Ensemble represents the best of Belfast on the world's stage; 'Lunaria' at the PRSF New Music Biennial; 'Abomination – A DUP Opera' at Electric Picnic; planned performances at the Southbank Centre; and a place on the steering committee for UNESCO City of Music.

I am so proud to have worked with the Belfast Ensemble to create critically acclaimed BELFAST stagings. Platforming Northern Irish talent, the Ensemble's diverse portfolio showcases excellence, champions innovation and delivers for audiences every time.

**Kate Guelke, Associate Producer for the Belfast Ensemble**











**Video Materials.**

[-ABOMINATION: A DUP OPERA \(full 2019 performance, Belfast\)](#)

[-MASS \(2021 preview\)](#)

[-Democracy Dances \(2021\)](#)

## 'Abomination – A DUP Opera' – Reviews

\*\*\*\*\* *Fiona Maddocks, The Guardian*

Driving over the hills into north Belfast, as fields give way to houses, the visitor is plunged into election fever. Images of Nigel Dodds, the Democratic Unionist party MP for this hotly contested ward, smile from lampposts like a human flag parade all the way into the city. A few hours later, this same face stares out again, projected on to a backstage screen in the beautiful Lyric theatre. Arlene Foster and other unionist MPs, pixelated, smudgy but unmistakable, are there too. The event is not a political rally, but the world premiere of **Abomination: A DUP Opera**, an outstanding new work by the Northern Irish composer Conor Mitchell, director of the Belfast Ensemble, who performed it.

With the forthcoming general election and the recent passing of same-sex marriage legislation in Northern Ireland, the opera's timing proved even more pertinent than predicted, no longer merely edgy but, as many heralded it, "incendiary". The arts may often have been a source of hope across the province's divided communities, but rarely in so overtly political a manner. This marks a new chapter. The subject matter is homophobia, but specifically the way language is used as a form of abuse. Commissioned with funding from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the British Council and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and seen in a short, taster version last year, it launched the 13th annual Outburst Queer Arts festival.

The opera's framework is a BBC Radio Ulster programme from June 2008 fronted by Stephen Nolan (a speaking role, probingly delivered by Tony Flynn), with Iris Robinson, a DUP MP and wife of the first minister of Northern Ireland, as his guest. Every word of the libretto, which Mitchell has skilfully stitched together, is verbatim, from anti-gay comments made by Iris Robinson and others. A born-again Christian who had declared homosexuality "an abomination", she was invited to reflect on her comments following an attack on a gay man in north Belfast. We see her defending her viewpoint and recommending the services – in a gorgeously melodic aria – of "a very lovely psychiatrist" who tries to help homosexuals become heterosexual.

The radio programme caused a scandal at the time, particularly because the mentally fragile Mrs Robinson was having an affair with a 19-year old-man. It's now part of Belfast folklore. Even if prejudice remains, political language towards the gay community has become more circumspect since. Only an outsider – like myself – would need the level of context given here. Expertly and simply staged (the entire budget was a mere £60,000), the opera's small cast was led by the Canadian-born, London-based soprano Rebecca Caine, brilliant in the role of Iris Robinson. The action features a drag act (Matthew Cavan, adorned in huge orange wig and orange platform heels), a chorus of supposed DUP members singing "Peter will not marry Paul in Northern Ireland", rainbow balloons and cake, and a splash of scurrilous cabaret. The description may make it sound no more than agitprop. On the contrary, this is a fully fledged work of art, clear-eyed in its purpose, redemptive and sober rather than aggressive or hysterical, all woven into a score of musical dexterity and warmth. There are plenty of jokes too.

Mitchell, who designed and directed the show (with a team of lighting, video, sound designers), has written theatre music in the past: he understands pace and contrast. He's at ease with a range of styles: a mini fugue hammers out the words "a harmful deviance"; a rapid, Rossini-style ensemble makes shrill comedy of "They are poofs"; a "lacrimosa" aria sung by the troubled Iris ("I can't honestly understand/ Why they go that way") arouses sympathy. The 13-strong instrumental ensemble, dominated by a quartet of woodwind, was conducted by Tom Brady. The audience gave a standing ovation at each of the five sold-out performances. The emotional response was palpable. On the night I was there, many were in tears. The festival organisers have been inundated with messages of support, many from people who had never been to an opera before, from the LGBT community and beyond. *Abomination: A DUP Opera* is a richly entertaining and significant work. It now deserves a wider audience.

\*\*\*\* *Fiona Charleton, The Sunday Times*

Whoever coined the phrase "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" was lying. Words matter. *Abomination: A DUP Opera* by Conor Mitchell confronts the harmful power of language in this highly unusual rehashing via opera of the 15 minutes of fame of Iris Robinson MP (a nuanced performance by Rebecca Caine, a Canadian soprano). In an infamous radio interview Robinson called being gay an "abomination" and stated that homosexuality made her feel physically sick. This highly charged opera matches that 2008 BBC interview for subtlety. Theatre often showcases victims, but this experimental hybrid production has flipped that norm. In a gutsy move, the composer and librettist Mitchell gives the DUP's bigoted, homophobic voices megaphones: literally and metaphorically. So, for 80 minutes, the Belfast Ensemble sing their ugly, hate-filled rhetoric tagged on to Christian values right in our faces. Is it triggering? Yes, but it's supposed to be. One leaves feeling as though one has just attended an intense session of exposure therapy.

At the heart of this satirical opera is Robinson's telephone interview with Stephen Nolan, the BBC Radio Ulster journalist, forcefully played by Tony Flynn in the only speaking role. At the time Robinson was a DUP MP and married to Peter Robinson, the first minister. A young gay man had just been beaten up in a homophobic attack and Nolan probed for Robinson's reaction. While condemning the attack, she let rip. To make matters worse, around that time the 58-year-old MP was having an affair with a 19-year-old, represented here by the dancer Reece Hudson. His appearance as an angel in virginal, white Y-fronts hints at Robinson's combination of fragile naivety and unthinking hypocrisy.

Mitchell weaves his narrative using verbatim transcripts of interviews and parliamentary debates featuring, among others, Ian Paisley Jr. An issue, however, is that unless you already know exactly what happened, it can be hard to follow, which is not helped by the fact there are no surtitles and the enunciation is not always clear.

Fortunately this opera is not reliant on a linear narrative. There's a lot going on. Indeed, it primarily impacts as a stunning visual experience that unfolds in explosively defiant ways. An example is the stand-out aria *They Are Poofs*, which riffs on Sammy Wilson's comment about declining the use of City Hall for Gay Pride because, as he said: "They are poofs. I don't care if



they are ratepayers, they are perverts.” This aria — a pastiche on Rossini, sung by the ensemble, including the soloists Matthew Cavan, Christopher Cull and John Porter — is a powerful example of how Mitchell confronts and reclaims words.

Conducted by Tom Deering, the 16-piece live orchestra effortlessly navigate Mitchell’s diverse score. Conan McIvor’s ingenious use of video clips, lip-synched over in a smart allusion to drag culture, is equally effective. Directed with extraordinary style by Mitchell, this production is not always an easy watch but it undeniably exposes the oppression of hate speech, finding some beauty in brutality.

\*\*\*\* *Cathy Desmond, Irish Examiner*

Premiered in 2019 at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast amid election fever and the passing of same-sex marriage legislation in Northern Ireland, *Abomination: a DUP Opera*, fortuitously caught the zeitgeist of the moment and garnered rave reviews.

Three years later, Belfast Ensemble - directed by the composer Conor Mitchell - are in the midst of a short run of the piece at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin last night.

The framework for the opera is the homophobia expressed by prominent members of the Democratic Unionist Party. Most of the libretto is drawn from an infamous radio interview in 2008 by DUP MP Iris Robinson.

Following an attack on a young gay man, host Stephen Nolan, played here by Tony Flynn in the sole speaking role, challenges Robinson on her provocative remarks in which she described homosexuality as an ‘abomination’.

The libretto weaves text of the interview sung by soprano Rebecca Caine, together with statements by other colourful DUP figures, most memorably, Sammy Wilson who declares, "They are poofs. I don't care if they are ratepayers. As far as I am concerned, they are perverts."

The slim plotline employs relatively large-scale forces, with 11 stage performers and a 16-piece orchestra. Conan McIvor’s video projection is a major aspect of the design. Facsimiles of press articles help to set the context of the time and pixelated images of DUP politicians appear behind performers singing their words.

Robinson’s notorious affair with a younger man is referenced when a dancer clad in Y-fronts and angel wings appears for a brief pas-de-deux. The inclusion of a drag queen in kinky boots and an enormous orange wig hints at the roots of the work as a cabaret-style revue.

Even though the sound balance in the auditorium is good and the singing excellent across the ensemble, I don’t catch every word, particularly in the soprano range. The ensemble move nimby about behind the main characters and the silhouetting of the ensemble in sharp grey suits was particularly effective.

Overall, while I would have liked more of the burlesque, cabaret elements, this was a skilful, well-crafted operatic piece that brings recent political events into sharper focus over a tight 70-minute running time.

*\*\* Chris O'Rourke, The Arts Review*

Maybe it was a technical hitch that led to the ten minute delay. Longer again if you took your seat early. In which the endless ringing of the unanswered prop phone proved painfully wearing. Yet it foreshadowed what was thematically to come in Conor Mitchell's critically acclaimed *Abomination: A DUP Opera*. Whose thematic questions repeat endlessly. Mitchell's libretto, cobbled from interviews and newspaper quotes, labouring crucial points on politics and language. Meanwhile music and singing prove to be another case entirely, being utterly extraordinary. Some of the best of recent times.

When finally answered, the offending phone belongs to former DUP party member, Iris Robinson. Who disgracefully claimed homosexuals were abominations in 2008, then stood her ground in an interview with Stephen Nolan. The homophobic murder of a young, gay man adding fuel to the incendiary fire, and the fear her comments might fuel more murders. In what follows, Robinson's character assassination is carried out with understandable glee, till it feels like the theatrically trolling of a bigoted troll. The two uglies never quite making for a beautiful. The born again Christian, holier than thou Robinson proving a monstrous hypocrite, and not just on account of her vile comments. There's also her adulterous affair with a nineteen year old boy and later accusations of fraud. Unsympathetic villains don't come much cleaner. Only Voldemort, perhaps.

Should political figures be held accountable for their bigoted views and their possible consequences? Stephen Nolan presses his mantra-like question on the unapologetic Robinson, who doesn't just incite the lunatic fringe as become their martyred poster girl. This being her greater crime; lending political legitimacy and encouraging hatred to crawl out of the woodwork. Justified by a bastardised Protestant Fundamentalism built from a literalist, pick and mix Christianity. One that doesn't speak for many Protestants. Many of them gay. Or God, if you're so inclined, and read what She says about love and inclusiveness. Even so, *Abomination: A DUP Opera* appears to suggest a blanket equating of religion with bigotry. In fairness, religion has a lot of work to do if it's serious about building bridges. Even then, politics should still take out a restraining order.

While it labours such points, *Abomination: A DUP Opera* does so with considerable style. Originally produced in 2019, it's design proves to be a technical tour de force. Conan McIvor (video), Mary Tumelty (lighting), Ian Vennard (sound), along with Mitchell being a collaborative dream team. Images roll past like a media nightmare, harmonised with projected quotes from articles and conversation. Foregrounded like thoughts whose subtext morphs and expands. Documented quotes from which Mitchell's libretto is built. Yet even allowing for the projection of texts, surtitles are badly needed in certain places.

Musically, Mitchell's score suggests a near perfect harmony of classical and cinematic components. Haunting, wild, dark, passionate, music surges, sweeps, swoons and seduces, marrying classic largesse and cinematic intimacy. As for singing, individually and chorally, it's just stunning. Even allowing for one off key, yet enthusiastic male voice, noticeable amongst the operatic heavyweights (no names). Rebecca Craine's Iris, and Sarah Richmond as a DUP member, could sing the phonebook, or cobbled media quotes, and make them hypnotic. Matthew Cavan, Christopher Cull and John Porter are also wonderful. Who, along with the rest of the ensemble, deliver vocal layering that is just exquisite. And yes, Mitchell directs too. And does an extraordinary job, deftly using Tony Flynn's Nolan like a recitative to comment on the action. If the opera slips into revue in a couple of places, it introduces theatrical ingenuity, colour and costuming that leaves you wishing for more. The Angel in Robinson's bedroom scene being a fusion of simplicity and beauty. One of many lighthearted, but supremely serious moments.

Without doubt, Robinson's loathsome comments are despicable. Yet like the Parisian women whose heads were shaved after World War II for being Nazi collaborators, there's something of both justice and horror in Abomination: A DUP Opera's public shaming. Yet the story doesn't end there. If Robinson's mental health issues are arguably telling, her other psychological issue is a clean cut affair; her advocacy for gay conversion therapy. Which twenty-one members of an "apologetic" DUP party, supposedly shamed by Robinson's quotes, opposed banning in 2021. Bringing us full circle back to the original question: should political figures be held accountable for their bigoted views and their possible consequences?

# Best of 2021: Theatre around the UK

FEATURES DEC 14, 2021 BY THE STAGE

The Stage's critics round off what has been a challenging year for theatre with their pick of UK shows staged outside London in 2021



## Mass

### Outburst Queer Art Festival, Belfast

For sheer musical, theatrical, operatic and visual spectacle, audacity and chutzpah, there has been nothing to rival the Belfast Ensemble's *Mass*, conceived and composed by Conor Mitchell for Outburst Queer Art Festival and staged in the vast emptiness of the Belfast Telegraph's former print room.

*Jane Coyle*

Presented as part of the Outburst Queer Arts Festival, Conor Mitchell's *Mass* is a thunderous take on a venerable form that collides music and video with a bracing immediacy, directness and boldness of execution that merits being described as theatrical.

If such a conceit risks sounding sacrilegious—it isn't—there is no denying the obvious sincerity with which Mitchell explores and exploits his conception of the Catholic liturgy as having “an inherent drama drawing on themes of rebirth, change, redemption” to examine his own relationship with faith as a gay man.

Mitchell is no stranger to the stage. His play *The Dummy Tree* was commissioned by the National Theatre in 2009, he has created several pieces for Youth Music Theatre UK, collaborated with playwright Mark Ravenhill and has begun to make his mark in opera, most recently with his caustic exposé of homophobia and hypocrisy in the Bible-thumping Democratic Unionist Party, *Abomination*.

There is certainly something operatic about Mitchell's realisation of the *Mass*, compact though it is at just 40 minutes in length. Brevity doesn't hinder its ambition, its aspiration towards epic scale voiced through music of dynamic extremes anchored in pummelling percussion,

amphetamine-laced brass and strings that narcotically pulse between slicing, skittering narration and ethereal auras enveloping sung text.

Mitchell's muscular music manages to be wholly contemporary even while solidly rooted in antique precedents and laced with acknowledged allusions to Thomas Adès and, to my ears, the otherworldly beauty of Ligeti's *Lux Aeterna* and corporeal terror of Penderecki's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*. A perfect illustration, surely, of Catholic contrarities.

The novel choice of venue—the stripped-bared but still imposing shell of the print works that once housed and produced Northern Ireland's leading daily newspaper, the *Belfast Telegraph*—pointedly echoes Mitchell's preoccupation with “rebirth, change, redemption” in the *Mass*. It's the latest example of a growing trend pioneered by Tinderbox and Kabosh, more recently utilised by [Cahoots NI](#) and [Big Telly](#), for Northern Irish companies to reclaim abandoned or previously inaccessible locations as performance spaces. Here, it packs an undeniable punch.

Providing elliptical commentary of their own are specially commissioned films by seven queer film-makers from Belfast, Brazil, Egypt, India, Syria and the United States. Projected, not always clearly, onto bare, three-storied walls scarred by an exposed skeleton of steel, brick and doors that open into emptiness, they feature assorted images of Renaissance art, an uncertain arboreal idyll, fleeting allusions to the Passion and scrolling hieroglyphic text that flash by with a fevered, stroboscopic intensity that threatens synaptic overload.

What is lacking perhaps—to unite music and visuals and lock-in Mitchell's intent—is an element of stagecraft in the presentation. With singers and the musicians of the Ulster Orchestra and Mitchell's own Belfast Ensemble statically marooned on a central platform, the standing audience is left to its own uncertain, milling devices. Sheer brute volume alone isn't enough to fully cohere message and medium. It's an oversight that robs the piece of a keener sense of engagement and greater immersive intimacy.

But as statement pieces go, *Mass* remains a significant achievement in a performance delivered with adrenalized conviction by all involved under Mitchell's own baton.

Michael Quinn, British Theatre Guide

## 'The Musician' – Reviews

The 2021 Belfast Children's Festival is screening the online premiere of the Belfast Ensemble's horror opera for children, a title guaranteed to ignite young imaginations and strike trepidation into their adult chaperones.

A chamber version of The Musician was commissioned by Cahoots NI and the Old Museum Arts Centre in 2007 but Conor Mitchell's newly enhanced storyline and score, complete with richly detailed live orchestration, have grown it into a sophisticated, multi-layered piece.

Filmed at the Lyric Theatre, with atmospheric lighting and vivid back projections, it looks and sounds fabulous, a gorgeous taster for the fully formed stage version that will surely follow.

Mitchell has assembled an intriguing line-up of largely home-grown singing talent for his threatening prequel to the Grimm Brothers' legend The Pied Piper of Hamelin. As the crimson-suited Narrator, Matthew Cavan integrates effortlessly with the fable of musicality and morality unfolding around Sarah Richmond's appealing, spindly legged Boy.

Alone and hungry, nameless and friendless, this pathetic street child longs to escape the disdain of a yellow-coated Vile Little Girl (Rebecca Murphy) and the uncaring townspeople who look down on him. His pet mouse – sweetly danced by Maeve McGreevy – and a travelling Musician (Paul Carey Jones) will ultimately come to his rescue, the first imposing gruesome revenge on the Boy's tormentor, the second offering him a magical gift to be cherished and used wisely. In a clever narrative twist, the finale flips forward, transforming a downtrodden young innocent into a potentially malevolent force, his sights set on revenge, his compass pointed towards the children of Hamelin.

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Jane Hardy, The Stage

contributed a colourful set, and her costumes for the various illustrious ladies are deliciously characterful. Thanks to Clare Whistler's direction, the hour-long performance is admirably paced. Once life returns to normal in the performing arts, one can only hope that this expertly crafted, highly imaginative piece will be produced frequently for live audiences.

ROGER PINES

### The Musician

<https://www.youngatart.co.uk>

'A Horror Opera for Children' was the description attached to *The Musician*, Conor Mitchell's new work for the Belfast Ensemble, filmed in the city's Lyric Theatre and streamed over a March weekend as part of the Young at Art children's festival. It's worth taking seriously any warning of hard-hitting content from the team that a little over a year ago staged the award-winning *Abomination: a DUP Opera*, a merciless look at the homophobia rife in Northern Irish public life. This time, though, those of a sensitive disposition had little need to look away. Horror was restricted to one episode only, around three-quarters of the way through the hour-long opera, when the aptly named Vile Little Girl was attacked by rats and reappeared smeared in liberal quantities of stage blood.

*The Musician's* spookiness came partly from Mitchell's score, which was conducted by Tom Brady and played by a responsive 16-strong orchestra, spaced out behind the main playing area. They revelled in the hard-edged jauntiness of an overture that recalled Shostakovich in showman mode, and the flautist relished all the chances to shine. There were many of them: Mitchell's opera is about a street boy, his only friend a mouse, who is taught to play the flute by a travelling musician. After learning about betrayal and about the power that his musical talent conjures, he learns to control bigger rodents with pointer teeth. This is, we realize, an origin story for the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

The story was told by a charismatic and sinister narrator, dressed all in red (costumes were by Laura Firby). Matthew Cavan spoke and sang the lines of Mitchell's own

libretto, slipping seamlessly from conspiratorial questions addressed to the camera ('Can you see me? You may regret your answer') into ever more rhythmic poetry and then song. Paul Carey Jones gave the travelling Musician a similarly strong presence, his resonant baritone riding a brief, almost Wagnerian swell in the orchestra as he warned about how music can lead to ruin 'if for selfish reasons made'. It was he, also, who voiced the question of whether music should be free or paid for—especially topical in the context of an online



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Opera, May 2021

performance. The mezzo-soprano Sarah Richmond showed us all the stages in the Boy's journey away from shiny-eyed innocence, and Rebecca Murphy brought a sparkling soprano to the Vile Little Girl. The Boy's pet mouse had a brief moment in the spotlight, danced by Maeve McGreevy to Jennifer Rooney's twitchily balletic choreography.

Mitchell also directed the production, which took place mostly on and around a single grass-covered platform, lit by Mary Tumeley and with a screen showing Gavin Peden's scene-setting projections at the back. It was basic but imaginative enough, and should be easy to take on tour when live-performance opportunities re-emerge.

ERICA JEAL

## OPERA ON CD

### Demofonte, Gluck

Sylvia Schwartz (*Diretta*), Ann Hallenberg (*Creusa*), Romina Basso (*Clorinda*), Nerea Berraondo (*Adrasto*), Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen (*Timante*), Colin Balzer (*Demofonte*), Vittorio Prato (*Alcandro*), Il Complesso Barocco, c. Alan Curtis. Brilliant Classics 95283 (three CDs)

Here's a happy surprise. At first glance, a recording directed by the late Alan Curtis, made in 2014 but left in storage after his death a year later and issued only now, of an extreme 18th-century rarity—the 28-year-old Gluck's third opera, a full-scale *opera seria* surviving only in the form of full musical numbers and most of whose connecting *recitativo secco* had to be composed afresh by Curtis himself—might be expected to arouse little more than specialist or library-shelf interest. For me, instead, its distinctive qualities communicate themselves forcefully across large spans of Brilliant Classics's three-CD set, qualities of vocal and instrumental freshness and rhythmic vitality, of keen dramatic responsiveness to emotional and character depiction and differentiation; indeed, they've supplied something of a revelation. To put it more plainly, even I didn't know Gluck was already that good that early on!

A few facts first. *Demofonte* was written for Milan's Teatro Regio Ducale, where on 6 January 1743 it had a notably successful first performance. In the same theatre his first opera, *Artaserse* (1741), had been

likewise well received, as was *Demetrio* at the Venice San Samuele the following year. The distinguished 1743 cast was headed by the star castrato Carestini, by that stage more alto than soprano, who developed so strong an enthusiasm for the work as a whole and, of course, for its leading role—not the titular king Demofonte but his supposed son Timante—that he attempted, unsuccessfully, to get it staged next in Padua. Its Metastasio libretto was pre-existent, as were those of the previous two Gluck operas: their first composers a decade or so earlier had been Vinci (*Artaserse*, 1730) and Caldara (*Demetrio*, 1731, and *Demofonte*, 1733), and thereafter all three texts were to be reused multiple times (Gluck's *Demofonte* is 17th in the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera's* lengthy list).

A point worth making vigorously at the start: Gluck, who ended up the composer of at least 20 Metastasio stage works, gained vast experience of the Arcadian librettist's elaborately woven conversation-piece dramas, with their elevated stylistic, linguistic and formal traits and thematic interweavings of high-born personages, in

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THE MONTH

Opera, May 2021

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