

Review: “The Remarkable Rocket” by Edinburgh Studio Opera

An online performance *The Remarkable Rocket* was presented by local student opera group, Edinburgh Studio Opera.

The pandemic has been a trying time for music ensembles in general and student music groups – subject to not one but two or even three sets of restrictions – have been some of the hardest hit. Thankfully, groups like Edinburgh Studio Opera (ESO) are taking the initiative and making the best of technology to move productions online, despite being at a huge disadvantage compared to professional ensembles with access to far greater resources.

In these circumstances it is commendable that a student opera ensemble should try to put on a public performance at all, let alone a full production with a runtime of over an hour (I dread to think of the blood, sweat, toil and tears that went into the music editing for what must have been hundreds of separately recorded audio tracks and videos!).

In a pragmatic move the group opted for a middle ground between a showcase performance and a fully staged opera, compiling a new work out of various numbers from opera classics (chosen to suit the available voices) drawn together within the plot of a short story by Oscar Wilde – “The Remarkable Rocket” – with newly written English lyrics by Jen McGregor and Grace Moran for the sung items to match.

While the choice to re-text existing music may be controversial, it was surprisingly effective in practice and far more successful than the approach often taken for 'staged' showcases where the original lyrics are retained and the plot twisted around the music, with often laughably paradoxical results. In many ways this was the best of both worlds: a tangible connection between the music and the narrative, with the instant accessibility of plenty of well-known 'audience favourites'... although sometimes the result was text that didn't entirely align with music, be that in rhythmic accent or emotive expression.




Wilde's story suited the occasion well – a tongue-in-cheek moralising fable about a precocious anthropomorphised firework whose self-importance leads to his downfall. When the eponymous Rocket fails to perform in the celebrations for a royal wedding he finds himself discarded in a ditch and, ignoring the prophetic wisdom of the pond-life he encounters on his way, meets an unbecoming fate when he is accidentally exploded in a bonfire.

The story is full of typical Wildean witticisms and acerbic social commentary, including jabs at both the comfortable no-man's-land of suburbia and the upper class's sneering disdain for it, and the memorably self-conscious line "love is not fashionable any more, the poets have killed it".

The choice of musical numbers was tasteful, with a variety of classic operas and operettas represented, and hit just the right level of accessibility as to engage the most casual viewer and still intrigue a seasoned opera veteran. It might have been nice, nevertheless, to have had some music written more recently than the turn of the 20th century – perhaps if ESO ever takes the production onto the 'physical' stage this would be the perfect opportunity to add some newly-composed music to Wilde's story.

The only major change to Wilde's plot was to replace his

original ending, in which the Rocket's demise goes entirely unnoticed by the two sleeping boys who found him, with one in which it is merely drowned out by a raucous party at the royal palace, represented by the 'Champagne Chorus' from Strauss's Die Fledermaus. While it is a shame to lose the symbolism of Wilde's admittedly implausible original ending, the implied meaning of the revision – that life simply goes on – seems equally cynical, even if it was just an excuse to have a full-chorus finale!

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Cara Blaikie as the Rocket
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Fraser Robinson as the Royal Pyrographer
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Claire Gilchrist as the Princess

Being unable to have all the performers in one place at once, the production was 'staged' by having individual singers recorded on their own webcams, lip-syncing with their vocal tracks, with a variety of virtual backgrounds. This led to a garish and somewhat amateur aesthetic, but one which – with some suspension of disbelief – strangely suited the zany, ironic sentiment of Wilde's prose. In some cases the results were hardly edifying, especially when the video had clipped or frozen, but it would be entirely unfair to judge the production by the same standards as their live performances in venues, or even those of online performances by elite professional groups.

The unhappy truth is that student, semi-professional and amateur music groups have been disproportionately hit by the pandemic restrictions and the simple fact that ESO have managed to put out a public performance at all is nothing short of miraculous. Despite the low-budget appearance this method of production did give rise to a few highlight moments:

such as the snap cuts in the royal wedding scene (the Bridal Chorus from Wagner's *Lohengrin*) of bored attendees surreptitiously texting, sneaking a swig from a hipflask, or posing for 'one for the Gram', and the audience sing-along in the Toreador Song from Bizet's *Carmen*, fully embracing the absurdity of having to record an entire opera from the performers' own homes.

Overall the standard of singing was high, considering these are student singers who in many cases may have gone more than a year without performing or rehearsing publicly. No performance could have been called less than competent and there were some that I'd say were exceptional. My only general complaint would be that in some of the numbers the sung text became quite unintelligible. Perhaps this was due to the technological constraints of recording on the singers' own webcams, but the fact that for some performers the text was crystal-clear suggests that there is a wider issue with diction; something which the choice to sing in English unfortunately makes more crucial than ever.

There were notable solo performances from Zorbey Turkalp as the Frog, whose commanding voice and genial acting (complete with amphibian onesie!) brought the Toreador Song to life; Cara Blaikie as the Rocket whose 'Iris hence away' from Handel's *Semele* showed off her vocal colour and versatility (along with a suitably haughty characterisation of the Rocket throughout the show); and Hannah Leggatt as the Catherine Wheel singing the Habanera from *Carmen*, with the vibrant tone of a younger singer but the masterly agility of experience, hand in hand with a sparkling attention to the text declamation, rendering every word both entirely clear and emotionally immediate and making this a show-stopping performance.

The duets and trios showed off an impressive quorum of up-and-coming singers, with honourable mentions especially due to alto Holly Gowen for their astonishing power in even the

lowest registers yet a refreshingly bright tone for an alto; and soprano Georgie McNamara whose youthful but warmly expressive voice was simply a joy to listen to.



Sebastian Schneeberger as the Prince



Zorbey Turkalp as the Frog



Holly Gowen as the Bengal Light

Ultimately you have to take the production for what it is – a group of aspiring young musicians making the best of Covid restrictions and some frankly rudimentary technology to keep doing what they love, and to share it with the world. If you're looking for something with high production values and the audio quality of a live performance then *The Remarkable Rocket* definitely isn't for you. But if you're happy to part with £5 of your hard-earned cash (or even less for students) for a charming and exuberant, if slightly make-do-and-mend performance then you'd do well to check it out... but what's more, you'd be supporting local aspiring singers and helping to safeguard our cultural future.

The online performance of "The Remarkable Rocket" will be available until 31st August. Tickets are £5 or £3 for students (plus a booking fee) and can be purchased via eventbrite at the [ES0 website](#).