UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN OPERA SOCIETY

STEPHEN SONDHEIM’S

SWEENEY TODD:

THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET

PROFESSOR PAUL MEALOR: Musical Director and Conductor

SARAH LE BROQ: Director

JILLIAN BAIN CHRISTIE: Designer

ABERDEEN ARTS CENTRE & THEATRE

Thursday 9th March, 2017

In her opening message printed in the programme for Sweeney Todd, Mhairi Sharp, President of the University of Aberdeen Opera Society writes, “I firmly believe that this is one of our best productions yet”. Having thoroughly enjoyed the opening night on Thursday I have to agree wholeheartedly with her. This was in every way a marvellously professional performance. One reason for that was the move from the Cowdray Hall to the Arts Centre with its much bigger stage. The stage design created by Jillian Bain Christie was up there with the best. It amplified the atmosphere of the piece perfectly and within limitations of space and costs it was remarkably adaptable to the requirements of different scene changes. The costumes too were splendid. Of course, what I go to such productions for is the music and that was absolutely first class in every respect. The orchestra was small with largely one player only to a part with the exception of the three superb percussion players. Sondheim himself had created this smaller orchestral version in which the piano has the pre-eminent role. Played in full musical technicolor by Jeremy Coleman it carried the full impact of the music with the other instruments, violin, cello, double bass, bassoon, clarinet, trumpet and clarinet colouring in the music and adding atmosphere. The role of the three marvellous percussion players was far more significant than that, often ruling the roost at many exciting moments in the production. Paul Mealor’s expert direction kept the whole show on the road and made it run seamlessly without a moment’s hesitation.

The chorus, which with Sondheim, is more than just the kind of thing you find in many operas where it fulfils the function of crowd scenes. It harks back to some of the ideas in Greek drama. Compare the chorus in Sweeney Todd to the one in A Little Night Music. They are not the same but they are related. The chorus in Thursday’s production was tremendous, carrying forward the drama, the atmosphere and the music itself.

The principal characters were superb. Some of the originally male characters like Adolfo Pirelli were sung by girls but I had no problem with that. Sweeney Todd himself was played by Ross Cumming with marvellously strong clear singing. He underlined the more appealing side of his character which, especially at the beginning of the opera, really does matter. As Mrs Lovett, Megan Cormack was in many ways his Lady Macbeth but she added a marvellous leavening of comedy to her character. She got lots of laughs. Oh, and her singing too was tremendous. If there are any “goodies” in this opera they were played by David Walsh as Anthony and Lesley-Ann Hastie as Johanna. They too sang superbly both as soloists and in the many gorgeous ensembles.

The real “baddies” in the opera were Colom Findlay as The Beadle and Dermot O’Connor as Judge Turpin, threatening characters it’s true but musically delightful as in Pretty Women where Dermot duetted with Ross.

Caitlin Bell as the Beggar Woman gave a splendidly strong performance as the character who in the end turns out to be Sweeney Todd’s missing wife. Maureen E Smith as the boy Tobias Ragg sang splendidly and added a lighter touch of comedy in her scenes with Mrs Lovett.

I have already mentioned the chorus and the superb ensembles that made so much of Sondheim’s music. These are not that easy but they were sung with a real professional polish.

I liked the way that the auditorium was used in the drama - congratulations here to Sarah Le Broq’s imaginative direction. The final scene was absolutely tremendous, both singers and orchestra bathed
the whole audience in Sondheim’s music. At the end of the performance the whole of the full house audience were rejoicing in Sondheim’s music. A sense of total involvement and hearty enjoyment filled the entire auditorium. The performers did not want to leave the stage and we in the audience did not want to go home either.