

Clemency, MacMillan

Michelle Trainor (*Hagar*), Christine Abraham (*Sarah*), Neal Ferreira, Samuel Levine, David McFerrin (*Three Travellers*), David Kravitz (*Abraham*), Boston Lyric Opera Orchestra, c. David Angus. BIS BIS-2129 (one CD)

There can be no doubting James MacMillan's commitment to music theatre. *Clemency* is his sixth entry in the lists, and the third running to a libretto by his regular collaborator Michael Symmons Roberts. It's a 40-minute chamber work, comparable in scope and feeling to an elongated Britten Canticle, in a contemporary, Middle Eastern setting. Three Travellers seek refuge from the desert heat in Abraham's tent. They prophesy that his aged wife, Sarah, will bear a child within the year, then prepare their weapons to annihilate two nearby towns. Are they angels, terrorists or both? Abraham pleads with them for clemency, if five souls 'good in heart and mind' can be found within. With bad grace they agree, leaving Sarah to lament the contradictions of creation and destruction.

Sarah's annunciation inspires good music, notably a radiant aria—yoking

Tippett's Sosostris to the omnipresent shade of Britten—in which she feels the new life stirring within her. The prolonged trio of prophecy for the ambiguous angels overflows with ecstatic light. Elsewhere there's some attractive, eastern-flavoured instrumental writing (think Holst's *Beni Mora* on speed); but despite its feverish, Shostakovich-like string counterpoint the climactic 'clemency' scene itself comes over as brusque, functional and undercooked. Sarah's closing lament brings a return to form, although there's something pat about the Hollywood-epic string aureoles floating above her words.

My feeling persists that MacMillan has yet to find the right operatic material, and that this causes him to cling to past solutions rather than risk finding his own new ones. Having said which, the real difficulty here is not with the score but

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rather with Symmons Roberts's laborious and self-conscious libretto. Too often he uses ostentatious phrases, leaving character and action in his wake as we strive to work out what he is trying to convey. 'Our daughters are as dry as an ostrich in the desert': the only way to set words like that is in concrete. And concrete wins out, in a work in which drama ossifies into Old Testament tract.

The soloists try hard to invest the text with a modicum of felt life. Christine Abraham's ardent, if not entirely secure Sarah succeeds best, while David Kravitz as her husband does his best to make bricks without much musical straw. The Travellers sound well together, and the orchestral playing under David Angus is virtuosic enthusiasm personified. The

recording (from Boston's Artists for Humanity EpiCenter) isn't BIS's best, contriving to sound both boxy and shrill.

I must mention that MacMillan's short opera is padded out to around an hour by the interpolation of Schubert's extended, early *scena* 'Hagar's Lament', affectingly sung by Trainor in the conductor's own orchestration and English translation. Hagar and her baby have been thrown out into the desert by Abraham and Sarah, in an act anything *but* clement, and are dying of thirst. An ironic mirror to the main plot? Another irony for certain, as Angus's crystal-clear text provides a hotline to Hagar's plight, and to a level of involvement missing from MacMillan's neatly-wrought but sterile sermon.

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