

SILVIA HRONCOVÁ

Director of the National Theatre Opera and State Opera

Britten's opera *Billy Budd*, about innocence and suppressed sexuality, on a Czech stage for the first time

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The first new production to be staged by the National Theatre Opera in the new year is Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd*, which will be presented on 18 January 2018 in Czech premiere. The lead roles have been assigned to the American baritone Christopher Bolduc and the Israeli bass-baritone Gidon Saks, while Captain Vere will be portrayed by the Slovak tenor Štefan Margita. The State Opera Orchestra and Chorus will be conducted by Christopher Ward, and the stage direction has been undertaken by Daniel Špinar.

Even though one of the major music-dramatic works of the 20th century, Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd* has to date never been performed on a Czech stage. Based on Herman Melville's eponymous novel, it tells a story taking place on a British battleship during the Napoleonic Wars. *Billy Budd* solely features male characters and, following *Peter Grimes*, is the second of Britten's "maritime" operas, in which the rolling of the waves and the roaring of the wind are palpable in each and every bar. All the characters may be deemed to be metaphorical too. Accordingly, Captain Vere, for instance, is the "judge" who has to make unpleasant decisions, while Billy Budd is an innocent, pure "angel".

In his adaptation, the stage director Daniel Špinar first and foremost focuses on suppressed sexuality: "I have approached the opera in a dreamy and slightly surrealistic manner. The music has struck me as being rather tender, although it renders a story set during the time of war. And that is what I would like to highlight. Our conception should also be more graphic compared to the majority of the opera's existing productions."

The visual aspect has been taken care of by a creative team made up of the set designer Lucie Škandíková, the costume designer Marek Cpin and the choreographer Radim Vizváry, who has also involved in the performance the acrobats of the Losers Cirque Company.

The British conductor Christopher Ward says that Britten's music is very close to him: "I feel that it is a part of my musical DNA. His language speaks to me very clearly, and listening only to a few bars immediately reminds me of home." Ward, who currently serves as the first Kapellmeister at the Saarländisches Staatstheater in Saarbrücken, considers the opera *Billy Budd* a fascinating, beautiful masterpiece of immense scale and power: "And within the epic scale on which it's conceived, it also

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contains the most finely drawn and subtle characterisations and internal dynamics between protagonists.“

The American baritone Christopher Bolduc will debut in the title role of *Billy Budd*: “Opera lovers should come see *Billy Budd*, because it’s a beautifully told story showing the complexity of humanity. The three main characters struggle between their own good and evil, dark and light, and perfection and imperfection. As in life, there are both beautiful and tragic moments in this opera, and audiences will find it very easy to relate to these characters and come away deeply moved by this masterwork.”

Captain Vere will be portrayed by the Slovak tenor Štefan Margita: “My role fascinates me as both a singer and actor. What is more, I have always wished to sing it, and now it will be my debut. Fifteen years ago, I heard the wonderful Britten opera in Paris, and it deeply impressed, enthralled and enchanted me.”

The Israeli bass-baritone Gidon Saks, who will perform Claggart, has had ample experience with the opera. He first sang the role in 1991 at the Scottish Opera, following which he has appeared in *Billy Budd* at Covent Garden in London, the Opéra de Paris, the Deutsche Oper Berlin and the Bolshoi in Moscow, where he has been nominated for this year’s Golden Mask award. Saks has made two recordings of the opera - with Kent Nagano and with Daniel Harding, for which he won a Grammy award. He seeks humanity and purpose in Claggart: “He is full of self-loathing, yet feels a desperate need to love and be loved. Billy is the trigger for his potential self-acceptance, but because he cannot allow love into his life (which would mean acknowledging his sexuality), he seeks to destroy the very thing that might redeem him. The audience may not feel any affection for him, but I want them to understand Claggart’s complexity and fear.”

The opening night of the first production of *Billy Budd*, on 1 December 1951 at Covent Garden, was conducted by the composer himself. The role of Captain Vere was sung by the tenor Peter Pears, Britten’s partner. In 1960, Britten revised the piece. The National Theatre Opera will stage it in its original, four-act version.

The next new National Theatre opera production, of W. A. Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro*, will receive its premiere on 1 February 2018, directed by Magdalena Švecová and conducted by Enrico Dovico.

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