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SOLDIERS' TALES

Silver Birch is a new opera that encourages a younger generation to think about the realities of war and the experience of fighting men and women. *Andrew Green* signs up to an arts project that has had a profound impact on its participants across a range of ages

It's a blustery early spring afternoon at Cressex Community School in High Wycombe, half-way between London and Oxford. I stifle inhibitions and join in the warm-ups before two performances by these secondary school pupils of a miniaturised version of Roxanna Panufnik's new 'people's opera', *Silver Birch*. Commissioned by Garsington Opera, *Silver Birch* is tough stuff. Gritty and uncompromising, it confronts head-on the realities of human involvement in conflict, bridging the gap between the Great War poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and modern dilemmas surrounding decisions to sign up as a soldier. This cut-down rendering packs plenty of punch in vocal and dramatic terms, not least thanks to the integration of Cressex pupils into the Foley 'sound design' team from Pinewood Studios. I confront a terrifying imagined wartime soundscape; my ears hum for hours.

The Cressex mini-residency saw a team from Garsington Opera (headed by the effervescent Karen Gillingham, creative director of the company's Learning and Participation programme) work with youngsters over three days. A string of other primary and secondary schools are involved in the *Silver Birch* exercise, which BBC Arts has been filming. Selected pupils will join the Garsington Youth Company for late-July performances of the complete *Silver Birch* in the company's award-winning auditorium on the gorgeous Wormsley Estate, owned by the Getty family and a short drive from High Wycombe. Members of Garsington's adult community choir and young musicians from the Buckinghamshire Music Education Hub also take part, dovetailing with professional soloists and orchestra under the company's artistic director, conductor Douglas Boyd.

▼ Pupils at Cressex Community School in an action-packed rehearsal for *Silver Birch*



DAVID FLEMING

Engaging with the local community has been a key element in Garsington's progress, not least since the 2011 move from its original home near Oxford. 'This work is incredibly important to us,' says Nicola Creed, the company's executive director. 'It's about far more than just saying, "Hey, this is opera! Why not come and enjoy it?" It's about making a difference to people's lives. We've been working, for example, with a group at Wycombe Women's Aid who've suffered domestic abuse, and with Stoke Mandeville patients who have severe spinal injuries. All this work is funded by grants from trusts and foundations, and by private donations. It's not about cultivating audiences. It's just the right thing to do.'

Some school headteachers were initially wary about engaging with Garsington, says Karen Gillingham. 'There was the suspicion that opera would alienate kids, and misconceptions of what it actually is. It's helped that we're able to say that our involvement costs them nothing, but equally it's been about gradually building trust via a succession of workshops.' Cressex Community School head teacher David Hood was effusive in his thank you speech following the *Silver Birch* residency.

Roxanna Panufnik confesses to having 'fallen in love' with the *Silver Birch* project since Douglas Boyd phoned her with the idea of a Great War-related opera. Garsington's original home near Oxford was a key inspiration, Panufnik explains. 'In 1917 Garsington Manor was bought by Lady Ottoline Morrell and her husband. She fell for Siegfried Sassoon – he visited Garsington several times. So it's been a matter of building a modern-day story from that connection. Sassoon is in there as a ghost, as well as Lady Ottoline.'

The *Silver Birch* libretto was fashioned by author/journalist Jessica Duchen. At the outset, she and Panufnik visited several schools with Karen Gillingham to fathom what ideas and themes could be developed. 'I was astonished at how easily pupils embraced Sassoon's poetry and things like what it might mean to go to war today,' Duchen recalls. 'I asked one young boy what he'd miss most if he went off to fight. He said it would be the silver birch outside his house, which he'd watched growing. I latched on to that immediately, not least as a metaphor for growing up. Things happen to you, dreams are shattered, and yet there can be renewal. Spring returns.'

Duchen also foraged for material from Iraq war veteran Jay Wheeler. 'The things he had to say about what drives individuals to volunteer for war were really powerful. His line, that it's your "one chance to do something brave", made it into the libretto. However, one problem dealing with a military story was not being able to reproduce some of the rich language soldiers inevitably use. We had to find a way around that.'

A major part of the challenge for Panufnik has been 'to provide music that's as aesthetically pleasing and enjoyable for the professionals as it is for the amateurs. As far as the vocal parts for the amateurs were concerned, I sang through every note myself. I'm not a good singer, so if I can manage, so will they.'

Eight of the youngsters from the Cressex school performances have joined the Garsington Youth Company for the *Silver Birch* performances, including a Polish girl who arrived in the UK last year. 'She said that taking part in *Silver Birch* made her feel for the



▲▼ Evoking the horror and heroism of war: composer Roxanna Panufnik (above) and librettist Jessica Duchen



first time that she really belonged here,' says Karen Gillingham. 'She'd never performed anything before. At last she felt she'd arrived. Two women from Wycombe Women's Aid have joined the adult choir. One of them said that being involved with the Garsington team had changed her life. She said, "I'm able to hold my head up in a way I never thought I could".'

After those Cressex performances, pupils were invited to put on paper their thoughts about the benefits of the experience. 'It helps you use your imagination in the future,' I read. Then: 'You don't feel as nervous when you're performing in front of lots of people.' And: 'It shows how much you can learn from so little.'

I engaged a pupil who joined the sound design group for the performances. 'Getting involved has given me much more self-confidence,' he said. 'It's opened my eyes to what you can do in the future if you work hard – it won't be just an office job for me.' Then he added: 'I've also learned how horrible war is. And what it costs.'

Silver Birch will be performed at Garsington Opera 28-30 July. Tickets from £10. www.garsingtonopera.org