

This was a lucky meet indeed

This year Claxton Opera had to abandon its annual production. However a chance meeting between Claxton's director, Richard White, and Rosie Johnston, director of Opera Unlimited, resulted in a visit by this touring company with four performances, premiering on Thursday, of a double bill: *The Mad Duchess*, a new one-act opera by Peter Cowdrey and Hamish Robinson, preceded by an ensemble performance inspired by birdsong. Thursday's performance proved the meeting to have been very fortuitous. *The Conference of Birds* was performed by the company's four instrumentalists, Jennifer Raven, flute, Liz Cowdrey, violin, Robyn Austin, cello and Peter Cowdrey, piano, who also composed the music for settings of bird themed English poetry, all wonderfully inventive.

Soprano Gillian Webster gave a bravura performance of the virtuosic writing of *The Song Thrush*, and the haunting beauty of Granados's *The Maiden and the Nightingale* was

The Mad Duchess

Claxton Opera

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perfectly realised by soprano Elaine Tate. The instrumentalists played impeccably, all performers were in 18th century costume, and each piece was beautifully choreographed.

The slender plot of *The Mad Duchess* concerns the attempt by the Earl of Montague to marry the richest woman in England, the widowed Duchess of Alhermale, who has vowed never to re-marry, except to the Emperor of China.

Claxton's small stage proves the perfect size for Rosie Johnston's clever production, beautifully dressed by Annie Russell. Again, a fine score by Cowdrey, especially his use of an ancient Chinese melody played by the violin. Excellent performances from Gillian Webster as the Duchess, Elaine Tate's Maid and Christopher Jacklin as the Earl, with every syllable of Hamish Robinson's libretto crystal clear.

Frank Cliff