

Opera

LIMELIGHT



EDITOR'S CHOICE



Dean Bliss

Peter Coleman-Wright *bar*,
Merlyn Quaife *s*, Barry Ryan *bar*,
Lorina Gore *s*, Opera Australia/
Elgar Howarth

ABC CLASICS 4811820



JOY'S JOURNEY IS PURE BLISS

Brett Dean's operatic debut comes up fresh and sparkling at last

It seems an age since Brett Dean's opera debut hit the stages of the Sydney Opera House, the Edinburgh Festival and the Hamburg Opera. Since 2010 it has been debated and recalled, and in the absence of a new main stage work from Opera Australia, been hailed as the last great Australian opera. It had been hoped that the ABC broadcast would crop up on DVD, but in its absence this 3CD set will do very nicely indeed.

First off, let me say that as a work, *Bliss* matures on multiple hearings. It's a big, sprawl of a story and Dean responds with a dazzling score that roams far and wide in its response to Amanda Holden's substantial, yet taut libretto. To cite influences is to do Dean a disservice as his music is always original, yet it might be fair to say that *Bliss* couldn't exist if it weren't for Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale*, Berg's *Lulu* and the late operas of Benjamin Britten. If that sounds like a rich palette, it should – *Bliss* is nothing if not eclectic in style, taking its cue from cabaret, from film, from art song, or what you will.

As one suspected hearing it in the tricky acoustic of the opera house, the orchestrations are delicious. Whether pastiching a circus march, sending up a music hall song or aping the sounds of a hospital or a swarm of bees,

Dean's imagination knows few bounds. His setting of vocal lines is sensitive, challenging and accomplished – and this was a first opera!? Cast and orchestra rise to it all superbly thanks to the firm hand of Elgar Howarth on the tiller. Better still, it has been caught and rendered in considerable clarity by the ABC engineers.

The cast really couldn't be bettered. Peter Coleman-Wright brings assurance and authority (plus bags of rock-solid tone) to the role of Harry Joy, the ad executive who comes back from a near-death experience to realise that he's been in Hell all along. Merlyn Quaife works stratospheric vocal miracles as his unscrupulous wife, while Barry Ryan is the perfect foil as his disillusioned business partner. Lorina Gore in the role of Honey B, an apiary-tending tart with a heart, impresses with her sweet soprano and there are characterful turns from the likes of a preening Kanen Breen, a multi-tasking Shane Lawrence and a lyrical Henry Choo who makes the Italian maitre d's 'cancer aria' really sing.

If all that hasn't convinced you to grab a copy, I might just add that hearing it all over again has persuaded me that Brett Dean's *Bliss* might just turn out to be the greatest Australian opera ever. Gosh. **Clive Paget**

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