

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

**Richard Fairman, 'Aldeburgh Festival 2014, Aldeburgh, Suffolk, UK – review',  
*Financial Times*, June 16, 2014**

As a coastal county, Suffolk has faced its fair share of activity in wartime. During the first world war Ipswich and Lowestoft were the target of enemy attacks. Nearby Orford Ness, a haunting wasteland now under the protection of the National Trust, still carries the scars of its years as a military research site, including unexploded bombs and atomic-era “pagodas” for weapons testing.

A few miles up the coast the Aldeburgh Festival is taking the centenary of the first world war as the theme for this year’s programme. Visitors to Orford Ness and Snape, home of the Maltings concert hall, will find photographic installations by Anya Gallaccio, comprising hugely magnified images of local bomb-blasted materials; they have been created for Snap, the festival’s visual arts programme.

Similarly, the first world war theme runs through many of this year’s concerts. Born in 1913, Benjamin Britten was nearly a child of the war and his lifelong pacifism may have its roots in that conflict. An exhibition at the Red House, the composer’s Aldeburgh home, includes documents that relate to his controversial period as a conscientious objector in the second world war and a horde of receipts (Britten never threw anything away) for donations to the Peace Pledge Union, CND, Medical Aid for Vietnam and others.

It follows that the centrepiece of the 2014 festival should be one of Britten’s most outspoken anti-war works: his long-neglected opera Owen Wingrave. Originally written for television, the opera still tends to get a bad press on the few occasions when it is performed in the theatre. The complaint is usually that it is too dry, with not enough music. Or people find its pacifist message too black-and-white. So having the composer’s own festival putting Owen Wingrave centre stage – this is its first ever production at the Maltings, not counting the filming of the original television broadcast – is an important step forwards.

Neil Bartlett’s production strips the opera to its bare bones. There is no scenery to talk of, though the costumes remain true to the late Victorian period; this bitter family struggle of old-guard army tradition versus youthful liberalism is played out starkly, save for the addition of some soldiers who move around the stage furniture (and how much better the opera’s claustrophobic atmosphere would have come across without them).

There is the basis of a strong performance here, if only the opera’s central conflict had been tackled with a bit more gumption. For Owen’s pacifist stand to rouse the audience’s support, he must be seen to be as resolute in his stance against war as his reactionary family are in favour of it. Young Ross Ramgobin sang well, but never looked ready to go out and fight for peace.

The ghastly family members were more potently characterised, especially Susan Bullock’s uptight battleaxe, Miss Wingrave, Richard Berkeley-Steele’s formidable Sir Philip and Janis Kelly’s brittle Mrs

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Julian. Jonathan Summers made a fine, complex man out of Spencer Coyle, the military instructor who is caught between two stools, and Isaiah Bell was a vivid Lechmere. Catherine Backhouse was not quite nasty enough as Kate and Samantha Crawford elegant, but surely too young, as Coyle's wife. Mark Wigglesworth, the conductor, kept up the tension and a slimmed-down Britten-Pears Orchestra created quite enough noise in David Matthews's chamber arrangement of the score. For Owen Wingrave itself this production marked neither victory nor defeat. The opera still awaits the clinching battle for its future.

The first world war theme was picked up again in the first morning recital at Blythburgh Church. A programme of music for piano duet started with Debussy's *En blanc et noir*, written in 1915, followed by Ravel's *La valse*, performed with élan by Tamara Stefanovich and Nenad Lečić. Then Stefanovich returned with Aldeburgh's artistic director, Pierre-Laurent Aimard, to give a truly heaven-storming performance of Messiaen's *Visions de l'Amen*, written in the thick of another war in 1943. Dervishes whirling in Turkey could not create a more dizzying vision of religious ecstasy than this. Every Aldeburgh Festival seems to have one stunning performance in the opening weekend. For 2014, this was it.

An evening of solo piano at the Maltings with Richard Goode – Janáček, Schumann and Debussy, all warmly sane and sensitive – interposed a period of balm before the onslaught of the late-night "Faster than Sound" concert in the Britten Studio next door.

Antoine Brumel's *Mass Et ecce terrae motus* (c.1500), known as the "Earthquake Mass", is one of a kind. But the excellent vocal group Exaudi and its director, James Weeks, decided to go for broke by inviting electronics expert Russell Haswell to create an accompanying sonic meltdown. The result was a full-frontal assault on the nervous system (ear plugs provided gratis) not recommended for the faint-hearted. A few cheers at the end suggested the earth had moved for some. Everybody else will be relieved that earthquakes in East Suffolk are generally a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

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<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/7d8902b8-f536-11e3-afd3-00144feabdc0.html#axzz34p6TApfi>