

MUSIC REVIEW

BSO clowns around with Bill Barclay's 'Peer Gynt'

Barclay's 'concert-theater' approach condensed Ibsen's play to around 80 minutes, providing a rare opportunity to hear 'Morning Mood' and 'In the Hall of the Mountain King' in dramatic context

By [A.Z. Madonna](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 8, 2024, 5:09 p.m.



Caleb Mayo starring as the title character in Bill Barclay's concert-theater adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's "Peer Gynt," with music performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. ROBERT TORRES

Grieg's "Morning Mood" has long since become a parody of itself. Imagine that warbling flute, trading off with the oboe, ascending. Did you see a cartoon sun rising, hear birds twittering, maybe groan internally a little bit? Today's audiences largely know its original context, as incidental music for Henrik Ibsen's surreal play "Peer

Gynt,” in name only. The same is largely true of “Peer Gynt” itself. Written in verse, set over a course of decades, and based on a fairy tale steeped in Norwegian folklore, it was difficult to stage from the get-go. (The play was written in 1867 but no one actually produced it until almost a decade later.) It never attained the popularity of Ibsen’s later realistic plays such as “A Doll’s House” and “Hedda Gabler.”

This week at Symphony Hall, the Boston Symphony Orchestra and theatrical-concert impresario Bill Barclay’s Concert Theatre Works teamed up to offer audiences a rare opportunity to hear Grieg’s music for “Peer Gynt” in context — maybe not so much the context Ibsen or Grieg had imagined, but a tremendously entertaining one all the same.

Barclay’s abridged concert-theater adaptation of the play was a BSO commission, first performed in 2017 and revived now for the orchestra’s “Music of the Midnight Sun” event. When orchestras play any music from “Peer Gynt” these days, it’s typically within the context of the two suites that Grieg published several years after the play’s premiere. Here one finds the familiar earworms: “Morning Mood,” “In the Hall of the Mountain King,” “Anitra’s Dance,” and “Solveig’s Song,” all of which have taken hold in popular culture far more than “Peer Gynt” ever did. Barclay’s adaptation gives prominent place to most of the music that Grieg included in the suites, while also incorporating lesser-known incidental cues.

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Some of those selections felt just that — incidental — but others were rare delights, including the spooky “melodrama with chorus” that marked Peer’s encounter with an unseen but terrifying creature called the Boygen, and the plainly beautiful a cappella Pentecost Hymn sung by the Tanglewood Festival Chorus near the end. The rowdy Norwegian folk dance called the “halling” was performed by Vidar Skrede on solo Hardanger fiddle, a violin relative with extra strings that exist to not be played, but rather to increase the resonance. (If you’ve never seen a Hardanger fiddle, [look it up](#); the fingerboards and scrolls are elaborate works of art.)

Guest conductor Dima Slobodeniouk deftly led the orchestra through the bulk of the score with only a few stray hiccups, most notably in “Hall of the Mountain King” when not everyone seemed to be in agreement about how much to step on the gas. Soprano Georgia Jarman was smartly cast as Solveig, the evening’s only singing role; her winsome and ethereal “Solveig’s Song” glowed like a window as seen through a snowstorm.



Soprano Georgia Jarman as Solveig in "Peer Gynt" with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. ROBERT TORRES

The remainder of the cast was composed of eight actors from Concert Theatre Works, and they were fully committed to Barclay's condensed and bluntly irreverent adaptation of the script, which included a heartfelt thanks to the public domain in its prologue and went on to incorporate references to Popeye the Sailor, European politics, and the modern definition of "trolling." As the wild-roving title character, Caleb Mayo carried the evening with clear diction and elastic, clownish physicality. Boston-based actor Bobbie Steinbach delivered a one-two punch of Borscht Belt-esque comedy and profound tragedy in her scenes as Peer's beloved mother. Robert Walsh took a terrifically imposing turn as the Button Moulder, a mysterious guide and narrator. All wore wireless microphones, but some dialogue was impossible to parse, especially in ensemble scenes or when characters adopted strong accents.

So far, 2024 has been a year of various experiments in staging for the BSO, and this is the strongest yet. Perhaps it's not entirely fair to compare Barclay's concert-theater to the orchestra's homegrown operas in concert, but the production only benefited from the smart use of the space and simple yet effective props and sets designed by Cristina Todesco, another local whose name will hopefully appear on a BSO program again before too long. A story may be complicated, but clearly, the staging doesn't have to be.

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

At Symphony Hall, March 7

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