

## Paul Driver Review of *Anya17*

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Another new opera on the misfortunes (putting it euphemistically here) of a female protagonist — Adam Gorb’s *Anya17*, given by Ensemble 10/10 under Clark Rundell in Liverpool and at the Royal Northern College of Music, in Manchester, where I caught it — is at an aesthetic remove from Weir’s. This hour-long, densely packed single act is conscientiously issue-driven, the harrowing subject being the sex trafficking that goes on in the European Union before our very eyes. A “\$32 billion industry”, we were informed, “second only in size to the drugs trade”, and frequently murderous.

Ben Kaye’s libretto is the outcome of gruelling research. The titular character is “an ingenue and child of uncaring parents” lured from an unspecified eastern European country with hopes, soon shattered, of a better future. The “17” may be her age, but is certainly her number on a list of buyable girls. The other three girls in the cast of seven include Mila (Joanne Holten), killed by the overseer, Viktor; Elena, who has been blinded by a beating and her baby son disposed of; and Natalia (Lucy Baines), a kind of brothel madam. She doubles as Carole, the counsellor who comes to Anya’s rescue, seen with her at the beginning and near the end, framing the action with slender hope; but the actual end is a terrible shriek by Anya and her disconnected words of pure pain.

*Anya17*, then, could hardly be bleaker, and the libretto has an earnestness chilling in itself, yet Gorb’s score is a marvel of boisterous inventiveness, albeit with a savage snap. The opening bars are like cracks of a whip, but the diversity of Gorb’s inspiration is quickly evident. Basically tonal, and with an eye for clever pastiche, it plausibly links (as he suggests) the spikiness of eastern European idioms with the sly smoothness of jazz; annexing the West End musical for Natalia’s gaudy numbers, but approaching the intensity of Berg in the remarkable interlude for unison instruments that marks Anya’s lowest point.

The vocal writing is skilful enough to let unsurtitled words emerge clearly a respectable number of times, and ambitious enough to extend to ensembles, with a concerted (sextet) finale that is as traditional to the genre as the theme, here drastically foregrounded, of female abuse. Andrea Tweedale, as Anya, gave a bold, accomplished performance. Amy Webber well projected Elena’s bitter pathos and Thomas Hopkinson managed the difficult task of being unpleasant before an enthusiastic audience in a small hall. The work did not seem to lose much by a bare concert staging — the director was Caroline Clegg — but did not need to be preceded by a first half of three modern pieces. The event was, admittedly, part of a festival of work by northwest composers, but the opera deserved, like *Miss Fortune*, to stand alone. □