

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Abomination: A DUP Opera

Friday 5 May 2023, 8pm | Sat 6 May 2023, 8pm | Sun 7 May 2023, 6pm
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2023. With this programme, we continue to celebrate classical music in all its forms with leading artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

In close collaboration with our dynamic family of Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists, we are presenting the full spectrum of classical music, as well as embracing new approaches to how we do so. We are thrilled to welcome such an incredible range of global artists to our spaces – and beyond – to perform, and you to see them.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Conor Mitchell *Abomination: A DUP Opera* (London premiere) 70'

Performers

The Belfast Ensemble

Tom Deering *conductor*

Cast:

Rebecca Caine *soprano, Iris Robinson*

Tony Flynn *actor, Stephen Nolan*

Sarah Richmond *DUP soloist*

Matthew Cavan *DUP soloist*

John Porter *DUP soloist*

Christopher Cull *DUP soloist*

James Cooper *chorus*

Tara Greene *chorus*

Helenna Howie *chorus*

Gerard McCabe *chorus*

Abomination began life when Ruth McCarthy, Artistic Director of Outburst Arts, asked us to provide a 'closer' for her festival in 2018; a short piece to celebrate the queer events of the previous week. Something 'joyous', she said. When we suggested a cabaret based on historical DUP statements she responded, 'I'll design the poster myself!' And that's how it started: a joyous cabaret to close a joyful week.

Perhaps the idea of using these words seems at odds with a celebration. But here context is everything. The gay community in Northern Ireland has been living with these statements, made by powerful people, for a long time. Harmful, difficult words that offend, dismiss, and – most problematically of all – go largely unchallenged and without repercussion. Words that seep into the skin, leaving a stain that some of us find it hard to wash off. Here was an opportunity to confront those words and – as queers often do – take possession of them; not defusing them, but re-electricifying their charge and refracting them through the prism of 'moment' and art. Owning them. That was joyous. That night. A celebration. And in that celebration, Northern Ireland tilted on its axis... in the right direction.

The cabaret event gave way to the creation of the full work you are about to see; one that would retain the essence of a 'revue', but with the added spine of narrative. For this, I looked to the infamous Iris Robinson interview with Stephen Nolan. Arguably the most provocative radio event of modern politics! Like the historical statements, these words – created live on air – have bled into the modern fabric of life in Northern Ireland. Robinson's character, and her on-air duel with Nolan have entered the realms of national mythology – at once fascinating,

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour 15 mins.
There is no interval.*

problematic and... here we go, operatic.

Opera, as a form, immediately fitted the needs of both the statements (epic) and Robinson/Nolan (personal). It is flexible, yet strong – providing a dynamic range that can be dramatically stretched to house a revue show, a cabaret and an ethical battle – all at the same time. It is also no stranger to self-mockery and parody – giving space for ‘numbers’ (arias) and comically melodic, often referential tones. These, to me, allow for artifice. In Iris’ opening moments, for example, there is a Mozartian tone – a camouflage she loses when she drops her guard, revealing her true music. It creates a crucial dramatic game: what is truth? Better composers than I have used this device. Stravinsky and Britten come to mind. But it’s also a prevalent feature of cabaret and drag: the mask we present to the audience – challenging them to look beneath – or, at the very least, recognise when it is on and off.

But it’s also a welcoming ‘way in’ for those unfamiliar with new opera, and forbids musical self-investigation – something which can easily trap a score in amber and detach it from dramatic purpose. *Abomination* was, for me, both private and public art. Its creation felt personal, cathartic and yet totally communal. Perhaps its greatest achievement – its only achievement – was the achievement of its creation and that joyful celebration; when Belfast artists, gay and straight, dared to challenge those in power by ‘singing their words back at them’. Perhaps it was Ruth’s poster? Or the fact that a theatre in Belfast would put it in their window? Perhaps it’s that. Perhaps that’s the achievement. The celebration. The joy. Change.

Conor Mitchell, composer/director

By the time that the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) was formed in September 1971, its co-founder and leader, Ian Paisley, was already a significant figure in Northern Ireland politics, famous as a firebrand preacher and a constant thorn in the side of the Unionist establishment. Through the years of the Troubles, the party constituted the main challenger to the dominant party of Unionism of the period, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). The approach of the party was encapsulated in slogans such as ‘victory before peace’ and ‘your pound in Dublin’s pocket’ (on the EEC). Fundamentalist Protestantism formed a core source of support for the party, but after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which the DUP opposed, it widened its appeal, becoming the dominant party of Unionism in the 2003 Assembly elections. The party gradually moderated its stance on the peace process, and in 2007 Ian Paisley became the First Minister of Northern Ireland under the power-sharing arrangements of the Agreement. In recent times, under a succession of leaders, the party has become beset by factionalism that reflects differences among party members on a wide variety of issues.

In 2021, DUP deputy leader Paula Bradley said that some of the things said by the party over previous decades on the subject of gay rights had been ‘absolutely atrocious’, adding ‘I can certainly say I apologise for what others have said and done in the past, because I do think there have been some very hurtful comments and some language that really should not have been used.’

Professor Adrian Guelke

Find out more

- ▶ [Conor Mitchell on *Abomination: A DUP Opera*](#)
- ▶ [The Belfast Ensemble](#)
- ▶ [Performer biographies](#)
- ▶ southbankcentre.co.uk

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Manchester Collective & Sean Shibe

Saturday 13 May 2023, 5pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

These boundary-breaking artists collaborate for the first time in a show that takes in a dizzying range of music, including new works by Kelly Moran and Emily Hall.

Daniel Piro, Michael Morpurgo & London Sinfonietta

Sunday 21 May 2023, 4pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

Daniel Piro is our guide for an exploration of time through music by Vivaldi and Grisey, featuring narration by author Michael Morpurgo.