

ARTS

Triumphant night at the human zoo

OPERA

ElysiumOslo Opera House
★★★★☆

Shirley Apheror

In a world where technology has enabled humanity to eradicate disease, ageing and death, 40 unmodified humans are kept in an island zoo. Occasionally, they are required to perform Beethoven's *Fidelio*; this goes horribly wrong.

This is the setting for Rolf Wallin's *Elysium*, a sci-fi opera given its world premiere in Oslo on Saturday. Wallin's music has always explored the permeable border between man and technology, and Mark Ravenhill's libretto is the perfect opportunity for the composer to tackle transhumanism's more murky ethical conundrums while extending his musical language.

Elysium succeeds not least because it is a well-structured drama, and Wallin has no qualms about bowing to operatic convention when it helps. It is abundantly clear that the Norwegian National Opera has lavished love and care on the production. David Pountney's elaborate staging is visually impressive.

Ravenhill's libretto tells the story of two women: the Wife (Lina Johnson), who yearns for escape and immortality, and the Woman (Eli Kristin Hansveen), a transhuman who rips out her chip in a bid to become human. The two briefly become lovers, and the Woman puts in a stint with the Wife's brutal Husband (Ketil Hugaas) and child (Aksel Johannes Skramstad Rykkvin) before Coraig, leader of the transhumans, arrives to put an end to everything.

The evening's greatest success is Wallin's musical language. You hear both humanity (arching, lyrical vocal lines) and the encroaching digital world (wonderfully visceral bodies of electronically enhanced sound and arsenals of percussion). Transhumans no longer need

words, since they can transfer data via their implanted chips, so unless they are communicating with humans, they sing in short bursts of coloratura.

Wallin's orchestral and electronic sound-world is emotional and engaging without ever lapsing into kitsch, even when he is quoting Beethoven. Very few composers can manage musical nostalgia without a significant cringe factor, but Wallin retains his own quirky language throughout, both original and highly communicative.

The ending is ambiguous. Coraig offers the remaining humans a choice between "singularity" (a new, bodiless existence in a utopic cyber-world) or annihilation. All but the Husband accept, but are they really uploaded, or merely executed?

Musically, the evening is first-rate, with wonderful playing from the opera orchestra under Baldur Brönnimann and uniformly fine singing from the principals. The boy soprano Rykkvin is freakishly good, with a musical assurance and richness of tone that are almost superhuman.

Pountney's staging is sometimes too explicit. Leslie Travers has produced illuminated body-stockings for the transhumans that are at once dazzling and remorselessly unflattering — a little more abstraction would have been a fine thing. But in all, the evening is a triumph for Oslo.

To April 2, operaen.no

MUSIC

Shye Ben Tzur, Jonny Greenwood and The Rajasthan ExpressBarbican, London
★★★★☆

David Cheal

Sometimes music does nothing more complicated than make you feel good about the world. Tonight was one of those occasions. Perhaps the musicians behind last year's *Junun* — Israeli



Digital divide: Ketil Hugaas and Nils Harald Sødal in 'Elysium'. Below right: Mel Giedroyc and Martins Imhangbe in 'Luce'

Erik Bert, Ollie King

composer Shye Ben Tzur, English composer and Radiohead guitarist Jonny Greenwood, and India's Rajasthan Express ensemble — had higher purposes in mind when they gathered at the Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur to record the album (there's a Paul Thomas Anderson documentary of the sessions): at one point tonight Ben Tzur, the project's mastermind, talked about dancing "to God, with God, for God". The result, though, for those perhaps less spiritually inclined than Ben Tzur and the Sufi-rooted Rajasthan Express players, was uncomplicated exuberance.

At the heart of it all was the percussion: the exhilarating rhythms rattled out by three drummers, seated and turbaned, using sticks and hands on dholak and nagara drums. Three brass players added raucous blasts, trumpeter Aamir Damami injecting squirry embellishments that at times sounded more South American than north Indian. Meanwhile the "drone" came from a harmonium and from the guitars of frontman Ben Tzur, in a knee-length Rajasthani tunic, and Greenwood, standing discreetly at the back in trousers and T-shirt.

Vocals, mostly in the form of circular, repeated chants and refrains, came

from Ben Tzur, qawwali singer Zaki Nizami and others in the ensemble. Occasionally Greenwood switched to bass to add sinew to the sound. A handful of tracks, such as "Junun", were given an undercurrent of pulsing electronic beats. But this was not really a cross-cultural experiment: this music was firmly rooted in northern India.

Less impressive was the amplification: right from the start, it was too loud, with the volume whacked up to levels more appropriate for a death-metal band. It was wearying to the ears. Respite came in the form of gentler pieces such as "Kalandar", with Ben Tzur on flute: free-floating, undulating and mellifluous. The album also features strings and female singers, both absent here; both would have added range and texture to the sound.

But still, with the band in full flow, drummers clattering, brass parping, singers imploring, this was music that transported the listener, not just to the state of Rajasthan but to a state of mesmeric bliss. Perhaps that's what Ben Tzur means by "dancing with God".

junun.co.uk

