

Anamchara, Songs of Friendship

★★★★

Theatre Royal, Glasgow

Rosenna East

The sense of festivity at the Theatre Royal on Friday evening was palpable, as a packed audience gathered for the premiere of Anamchara, Scottish Opera's contribution to the Glasgow 2014 Cultural Programme. The tone was lighter and brighter than a normal opening night, chiming with the celebratory feel in the city.

Champagne, meringues and sunshine helped to set the anticipatory mood above buoyant. The audience wandered admiringly around the half-finished building site that is the Theatre Royal extension, and happily, no-one fell through any holes.

This new work must have been a colossal job to put together, involving young singers and orchestra from Scottish Opera's Connect company, dancers, community choirs from Maryhill, and opera companies in Cape Town, South Africa, New Zealand, India, Canada and Botswana. So credit to all those involved, conductor Chris Gray, and directors Lissa Lorenzo and Martin O'Connor, for pulling off a show that was both heart-warming and professionally executed.

The music, written by Pippa Murphy, was poised delicately between being appealing to listen to, cleverly orchestrated, and also something that showed everyone on stage, from child to professional, in the best possible light. Pleasing high melismas for soprano Sarah Power, strings and percussion written to sound almost synthesised, plus light cultural references, kept the audience's ears interested.

The role of Alexander McCall Smith's banal libretto was less satisfactory, the link between it and the action on stage being at times somewhat unfathomable. A storm (very like the opening of the Flying Dutchman) provided a satisfying high point in the drama, despite its inexplicable appearance. It abated to reveal the highlight of the evening - two small boys singing a verse of Gaelic duet together.