

Tragic tale of a young prodigy

By Jack Massarik, Evening Standard 26.10.07



Julian Joseph: Not just Britain's most storming jazz pianist!



Julian Joseph – opera star? Certainly. Britain's most storming jazz pianist is also a skilled composer and orchestrator, and his artful score for the story of George Bridgetower, a black violin prodigy feted by 18th-century high society, deserved its standing ovation last night. A detailed jazz opera of many rhythmic variations and mood swings, it was also richly melodic and as comfortable for classically trained singers to perform as any such work since Porgy and Bess.

With Mike Phillips's libretto riding Joseph's tuneful links, we followed the true, tragic tale of a boy-wonder lauded by Beethoven but virtually orphaned when his father, a Barbadian page, is jailed for refusing to sell him to the Prince of Wales.

The second act features the adult violinist's doomed love for escaped slave Mary Prince and his meeting with William Wilberforce.

As Bridgetower, jazz singer Cleveland Watkiss achieved duet parity with three operatic singers, Franz Hepburn (Bridgetower senior), Abigail Kelly (Mary Prince) and Verona James (Lady Holland), but found Jonathan Kenny's princely falsetto harder to accommodate.

The 10-piece sounded much larger, with specific heroics by trumpeter Russell Bennett and violin dazzler Christian Garrick. Saxman Steve Williamson played with great feeling and economy, and his few spoken lines revealed hidden acting talents.

Julian Joseph's Bridgetower: A Fable of 1807

LSO St Luke's London
Kevin Le Genre

The sight of a handsome Steinway grand piano, tiered seating for the big band, a mounted circular stage and a projection of a world map behind it makes the point that this is no ordinary jazz gig. Indeed the ambition is more far-reaching. Pianist-composer Joseph deemed a subject as important as Bridgetower, the 19th Century West Indian-Polish violin prodigy who is a hugely empowering figure for modern black Britain, worthy of a jazz opera. And well



he might. The substantial resources (choir, lead voices, orchestra) are entirely appropriate for the gravitas of the story. With Mike Phillips' libretto opting for a boldly political stance, dealing with the racism of the epoch and the emotional anguish faced by the protagonist as he witnesses the suffering of slaves while he is the toast of London's smart set, the principal challenge here is one of proportion and pacing. How would such a multi-layered, intensely human story



provide introspection and depth and retain its momentum? The solution? Swing. Joseph's excellent score, touched by both blues and gospel, kept the well-mapped action moving briskly enough, although larghetto tempos illuminated key moments of soul-searching. The astute scoring of brass and reeds and use of clarinet and soprano sax to double many of the voices brought bold harmonic shading to the performance but it was the cast itself that excelled. Buddug Verona James and Jacqui Dankworth were outstanding and Cleveland Watkiss was simply made for the lead of Bridgetower. It could be a career high to date. Special mention must also go to soprano saxophonist Steve Williamson, soloing potently in the cameo role of Black Billy Waters and violinist Christian Garrick who skilfully handled tricky lines. However, there was no doubt that the real star of the show was Joseph. He has shown that his talent as a composer is more than up to his ambition as a conceptualist. Combining jazz and opera to tell a story of tremendous socio-political significance is by no means a simple task and Joseph has pulled it off with panache, proving himself worthy of a lineage of black classical musicians that reaches way back to days of old.

Bridgetower, Hackney Empire, London

By Mike Hobart, Published: October 29 2007 17:17 | Last updated: October 29 2007 17:17



Composer and pianist Julian Joseph's ambitious fusion of jazz and opera celebrates both the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the British slave trade and London's long, largely hidden, history of ethnic diversity. Themes of ethnic identity, human liberation and the curse of musical genius are played out through a fictionalised biography of real-life black violin prodigy George Bridgetower. The child and his father, a former Barbadian slave, fled the French revolution and were taken up by the court of George III.

Although Joseph's music was largely successful, and elicited strong performances from the central cast, a weak libretto by Mike Phillips at times trivialised momentous events, and eventually petered out.

Phillips opted to uncover black London's hidden history by focusing on personal relationships. Mary Prince, whose written account of her slavery was so important to the abolitionists' cause, was set up as a love interest; Bridgetower's search for his father dominated the second act. The fiction eventually reduced real events to background scenery, and with black London history so deeply buried it needed programme notes to sort fact from fiction. Bridgetower did have a sonata written for him by Beethoven and did die in poverty in Peckham, but he did not have a fling with Mary Prince.

That said, there was much to admire. Joseph has done far more than write a jazzy opera. The score lets the nine-piece band breathe while tapping into orchestral colours, and seamlessly blends composition and improvisation. Joseph accurately references the compositional techniques of the period, merging the disciplines of classical opera and jazz. Supporting operatic vocals with walking bass worked a treat.

The central performances were also up to the mark. Cleveland Watkiss, playing the adult George Bridgetower, transcended some pretty maudlin lyrics with smooth-toned delivery and technical control, and saxophonist Steve Williamson explored the further reaches of harmonic development. Abigail Kelly's stropky Mary Prince and Jonathan Kenny's foppish Prince of Wales were also well delivered. And Joseph performing as Beethoven was a nice indulgence, in this deserving incisive launchpad.

Review: George Bridgetower – A Fable of 1807

Wednesday, November 7, 2007.

By Karl Williams

We've left it so long. We've left it too long and I thought I want to tell stories about what makes a person like me exist. I want to reflect who I am with music and stories. We have to delve into our history; we must start telling our own stories."

– Julian Joseph

The London Hackney Empire is playing host to one of history's lesser known virtuoso violinist. It's the story of George Polgreen Augustus Bridgetower and it's playing to a full, highly enthusiastic house.

Bridgetower was born to a Barbadian ex-slave father and a Polish mother around 1780 in Biala, Poland. When he arrived to play at the court of King George III, aged ten, he was already a celebrated virtuoso.

He played throughout Europe with the very best of his time and Beethoven wrote a sonata for him (later re-dedicated as the Kreutzer Sonata when the two fell out).



Bridgetower was a conspicuous musician and notable member of Britain's early black community and multi-cultural London.

Yet despite all his achievements, he has largely been written out from the pages of history. This opera tells the story of a man who grew up courted by royalty and the establishment for his gift throughout his career as a brilliant musician, and one who was to die alone in a cottage in Peckham, South London.

There isn't even a plaque to mark his final resting place!

The opera's music has been written by Julian Joseph with the Libretto by the writer Mike Phillips. It starts with the chorus, which tells of Bridgetower's early beginning as a violin prodigy who has arrived from across the seas.

Bridgetower was presented as the guest of the Prince of Wales and his consort Mrs Fitzherbert. The Prince decided he wants to keep the young Bridgetower played by Jamal Hope, in his household. However, he has to convince the boys' father, played by Franz Hepburn, of his intentions.



We are then taken on a journey, which depicts the life Bridgetower lived as a very privileged individual at the time. His career and encounter with Mary Prince, played with passion by Abigail Kelly, as he's lauded by audiences with his virtuoso performances in Britain and across Europe.

It was while he was on a continental tour of Europe that he met Beethoven, who was so impressed with the talented young man that he invited Bridgetower to perform with him. It's during this time that Beethoven subsequently presented him with the 'Bridgetower sonata' he's written specifically for him.

An unfolding sequence of events are brought to bare on the life of Bridgetower, as a man, played in his adult life by a very charismatic and engaging Cleveland Watkiss. The most relevant of these being the act, which announces the abolition of slave trade by British ships trading across the Atlantic. And Bridgetower is about to state his claim as a man!

Julian Joseph and his Big Band combined with a stellar cast, blessed this opera with an excellent composition of music. With its fusion of 18th century classical pieces, entwined with contemporary jazz. The setting, with its warmth and depth, bestowed light and dignity to a persona whom time had forgotten.

This performance is also part of the three-month autumn schedule, which started back in September. themed "Passage of Music: Marking the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade". The festival combines a diverse mixture of film, opera, music, art, poetry, storytelling, plaque unveiling and all things cultural and creative.

If you have not been fortunate enough to see the Brigdetower Fable, I would seriously urge you in the current climate of commemoration, the sheer pleasure

of entertainment and enlightenment to go and see this important rendition of Black British history which should never be forgotten.

jazzreloaded. Jazz changes.

Bridgetower

Bridgetower – Hackney Empire – Thurs 25th October
Rachael Forsyth



A Jazz Opera by Julian Joseph and Mike Phillips

If there were ever two more contrasting words jazz and opera are two of them. Even though I've been classically trained for a large proportion of my musical upbringing I can't help feeling slightly negative towards Opera in general. There's something I find unsettling about the vibrato they use and the tone of their voices that for some reason sets me on edge. So when asked to attend the opening night of Bridgetower I was slightly apprehensive – mainly because I didn't want my own biases to interfere with the review of the night. I was also secretly hoping to get my own aversion to Opera dispelled that night!

The band was filled with great jazz musicians from the Julian Joseph Big Band – players like Toni Kofi, Russell Bennett and Mark Hodgeson were just a few names to be picked from the hot list. The overture that began the night was finger snapping and attention grabbing. The pieces shifted quickly and merged into different genres and styles – subtly moving from into 3/4 for a jazz waltz and out as easily. There were moments where the band wasn't as tight as it could have been, but with first night nerves and an almost packed house it was to be expected. As soon as they were settled the band was red-hot. Shifting easily and blending well together. Leading Julian Joseph was able to add his gentle touch to the ivory keys and work his magic in the band. It would have been nice to hear Julian featured a bit more, but as he was leading the ensemble through some tricky shifts it was understandable he wasn't able to sit back and do what he does best.

The stage was pretty basic and with the band hoisted on the stage it meant that there wasn't much room for the cast to move around during the show quite as much, but it did mean that the band was in full view and I could watch David Jean-Baptiste swapping effortlessly between clarinet and bass clarinet. Still, the singers managed well to recreate different settings well in their limited space and though the props were few, it was ample to set the scene so the audience knew what was happening.

As I mentioned the music was superb, each member of the band working hard to carefully balance which must have been hard for Mark Mondesir on drums as he was so far above everyone yet he still managed to blend well with the band. The lines between the band and the cast were blurred when Steve Williamson acted as Black Billy Waters and used his sublime soprano playing to link some of the scenes. There was only one moments that the band lead the way a bit too

far and almost drowned the vocalists, it was during a fast polyphonic movement and was probably due to the fact that the band was enjoying blowing than anything else. For the most part the singers held their own and coped well with the complex charts they had been given. Some of the harmonies were so complex they verged on clashing, only to resolve at the last moment – perhaps with a cheeky interjection from Christian Garrick on violin. The lead vocalists coped well with the challenging material and although some words were lost within the layered music's their ability to portray the emotion behind their lines was apparent and needed no words to explain them. At times I felt that the chorus would have been better amplified but perhaps with a bit more confidence to belt the tricky words out the same effect might have been achieved.

The vocalists in Bridgetower have as many credits to their biographies as the band does – just reading the program is like glancing through a who's-who of musical talent. Abigail Kelly has won many awards including the Birmingham Conservatoire Prize and Frenz Hepburn was one of the six finalists for Operatunity. Each singer brought their own style and sound to the jazz-opera. Jonathan Peter Kenny's impressive falsetto contrasted wonderfully with Hepburn's rumbling bass lines. For me the best vocal talent came from Hackney based Cleveland Watkiss and as he won 'Best Vocalist' in the Wire / Guardian Jazz Awards for three consecutive years I would hope so too. There was something about his voice that just shone through. When he sang a duet with Abigail Kelly you could almost feel the electricity and chemistry between the characters.

The whole night was about building textures and layers – Julian Joseph's Big Band reduced to 10 players, the five lead vocalist and quite a small chorus meant that each of the intricate lines were heard and performed well. It was almost like watching a tapestry being weaved. With each thread working within each other to create a picture before you. Due to my own slight misgivings about the whole opera genre part of me would have enjoyed the night perhaps slightly more if a gospel choir were used for the chorus or just jazz vocalists, but for the most part I was impressed by the music and style so could accept that opera can be made to sound good.

From the standing ovation given to the players from the stalls it wasn't just me who thought this. There was everything in it – great music, a chance to see some of the best jazz musicians play, good vocals and a bit of humour thrown in there just to spice it up for you! But what impressed me most about this night was the atmosphere. There was such a friendly relaxed atmosphere at the Hackney Empire that night that you could almost hear everyone willing the jazz-opera to do well and meet our expectations. It did and it excelled further.

