

# Iain Bell

an introduction to the operas



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*Seen and Heard*

# Introduction

Rose Moore

‘A big bowl of chocolate ice-cream...  
sprinkled with vinegar.’

Diana Damrau on *A Harlot's Progress*

Characterization is at the heart of Bell's music. He recalls participating in primary school performances of *Carnival of the Animals* and *Peter and the Wolf* which demonstrated to him the potential of music to dramatise. He immerses himself in source material, whether a 1732 Hogarth etching or the Stonewall riots of 1969. Such an approach is perhaps a nod to his early love of reading. He was by his own admission, a bookish child, adoring 'non-fiction. Encyclopaedias. Foreign language dictionaries.'

In 2004, Bell heard renowned operatic soprano Diana Damrau sing the role of Fiakermilli in Richard Strauss' *Arabella* at the Royal Opera House and was smitten: 'Her voice totally captivated me. The speed of her vibrato, high trills and facility at the top of her range left me speechless.'

Damrau went on to record his early song cycles, *Daughters of Britannia* (2007) and *The Hidden Place* (2009) and continues to inspire his writing. The composer always had her in mind for the leading role in his debut opera *A Harlot's Progress*, tailoring lines specifically to showcase her range and coloratura register. The opera is inspired by the famous series of etchings

by William Hogarth whose characters are brought vividly to life, reflecting all manner of degradation and depravity just below the surface of civilised London society. Encompassing the perennial themes of Sex and Death, Peter Ackroyd's libretto paints a gloriously grimy picture of seething streets, brothels and drinking dens. As Bell affirms, 'this was ripe for the setting'.

Contrasting in scale but not in ambition, Bell's one-act monodrama *A Christmas Carol* (2013, Houston Opera), based on Charles Dickens' beloved novella and with a libretto by Simon Callow, sets the tenor soloist a unique challenge. Twenty-four roles in all, from Tiny Tim to Mrs Fezziwig, are paraded alongside a feast of chamber sonorities. It is a true tour de force, both for the vocalist and tight-knit ensemble of woodwind, brass, percussion and strings. The composer describes the music's path as 'leading us ultimately from darkness to light' – a journey clearly reflecting Dickens' original text.



Left: Scene from Act 3 of *A Harlot's Progress*, Marie McLaughlin as 'Mother' Needham with the female chorus of the Teater an der Wien (2013) © Werner Kmetitsch. Right: Jay Hunter Morris as Scrooge in Houston Grand Opera's 2014 premiere of *A Christmas Carol*. © Lynn Lane

Bell is notable for his forensic examination of a libretto, as evidenced in his orchestration for *In Parenthesis* (Welsh National Opera/14-18-Now, 2016). The opera was based upon the epic narrative by poet and artist David Jones (1895-1974) which T.S. Eliot proclaimed, 'a work of genius'. The creative team at WNO saw its dramatic potential and librettists Emma Jenkins and David Antrobus, working with artistic director David Pountney and designer Robert Innes Hopkins, delivered a text and treatment that would demand close attention by any composer. To juxtapose the political turbulence and bloodshed of World War I against otherworldly dreamscapes was a colossal challenge, but one which Bell embraced.

Jones' Brythonic and Welsh texts are incorporated into the fabric of the opera in addition to Latin, German and English. We hear the Chorus of Remembrance, a female ensemble of goddess figures, recite from the medieval Welsh poem *Y Gododdin*: *Seinnyessit e gledydf, ym penn mameu* ('Swords ring in Mothers' heads') and from the Book of Revelation, *et vidi agnum stantem tamquam occisum* ('and I saw the lamb standing as if slain').

Traditional song *Sosban Fach* holds a special place in Welsh hearts; this was especially so during 'The Great War'. Bell's operatic setting is weighted with huge military and political implications, encapsulating the philosophy of a nation and presented as 'intensely tribal in nature'. Such references are poignant, resonating with the eternal themes of conflict and resolution. In *Parenthesis* embroils its cast and audience in a dark landscape, lurching from the claustrophobic trenches of the Somme to the ever-shifting visions of Private Ball. We bear witness both to the stark, skewed reality of war and



Left: Scene six from Welsh National Opera's premiere of *In Parenthesis* (2016), Andrew Bidlack (Private John Ball) and Marcus Farnsworth (Lieutenant Jenkins) © Bill Cooper. Right: Act 1 Scene 1 of *A Harlot's Progress* - Moll arrives in London, Diana Damrau as Moll Hackabout with the chorus of the Teater an der Wien (2013) © Werner Kmetitsch.

Bell's euphoric dreams of a goddess world. Bell's orchestra has ragged brass locking horns with slimy strings, peppered by crazed artillery percussion and squalling woodwinds before singers are shrouded by harp and luminous glockenspiel. Finally, languid vocal lines ascend from the chaos, promising salvation.

When asked how he approaches the practicalities of composition on such a large scale, Iain pauses then smiles. 'It's like breathing...', he shrugs. 'The music's just all there, inside my head.'

With each new commission Bell's confidence has grown and his orchestral palette has become more adventurous. He absorbs and processes diverse sound-worlds, from Monteverdi's pioneering harmonic progressions, antiphony and word-painting to the colouristic writing of Mahler, Strauss and Ravel. More recently he has been captivated by the spectral sonorities of Dutilleux and Ligeti. This can certainly be heard in *Jack the Ripper: The Women of Whitechapel* (2019). Refreshingly, the opera focuses not on the perpetrator but rather on the community of East End women living with violence and degradation every day and highlights the brutality of Victorian society. Strong women are the beating heart of this work, their outpourings supported by characterful fragments of melody in woodwinds and brass or punctuated by tuned percussion and triangle. Bartók pizzicato brings a smarting discomfort, muted strings deaden and distance the accompaniment. Cymbalom is featured throughout, representing the ominous presence of evil (The Darkness) and crotales illuminate Mary Kelly's much-loved daughter (Magpie).

Bell draws inspiration from the human condition. He dares to portray our darkest traits, failings and flaws yet his music glimmers, hinting at the possibility of survival, redemption, hope ...

Welcome to his world.

# Biography

Iain Bell's love affair with the voice is evidenced by his prolific output of vocal works, earning him the attention of many of the greatest singers of our generation who have performed his music at venues including Wigmore Hall, Carnegie Hall and the Munich Opera Festival.

His first opera *A Harlot's Progress* received its world premiere in 2013 at Vienna's Theater an der Wien. Based on Hogarth's etchings to a libretto by British author Peter Ackroyd, it was performed by a stellar cast headed by German soprano Diana Damrau and US-baritone Nathan Gunn in a production by Jens-Daniel Herzog, conducted by Mikko Franck. It received tremendous critical acclaim with the New York Times praising the strength of Bell's orchestral and vocal writing. It was described in Der Standard as a 'A soul devouring juggernaut' and labelled as 'cinematic, dramatic and thrilling' in Kurier.

Given 5-stars and described by the Financial Times as 'a brilliant new opera' Bell's second, based on Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* received its world premiere at Houston Grand Opera in December 2014. An adaptation of Dickens' own one-man version of the story, scored for chamber orchestra &





tenor, it was performed by US-heldentenor Jay Hunter Morris in a production by Simon Callow under the baton of Warren Jones. The piece has since been nominated for the World Premiere award at the International Opera Awards 2015 and in December 2015 was staged in a new production at Welsh National Opera, followed by a subsequent new staging at the Teatro Sociale in Trento in 2017.

Bell's critically-acclaimed third opera *In Parenthesis*, based on David Jones' eponymous World War One epic poem (directed by David Pountney/ conducted by Carlo Rizzi) received its world premiere at Welsh National Opera with further performances at the Royal Opera House in Summer 2016. The Independent's 5-star review described the work as a 'powerful act of remembrance', with The Stage calling Bell's score 'technically exceptional' and The Telegraph describing the opera as 'gripping and moving'. It was streamed globally on Opera Platform and broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

In the concert hall Bell has worked with pianists including Helmut Deutsch, Roger Vignoles, Iain Burnside, Simon Lepper and Julius Drake. Recent highlights include the world premieres of his song cycles of you at Carnegie Hall by American mezzo soprano Jamie Barton and *These Motley Fools* at Wigmore Hall by countertenor Lawrence Zazzo. Bell's concert ayre *A Litany in Time of Plague*, a commission from the Munich Opera Festival for chamber orchestra and mezzo soprano, received its first performance in July 2015. *Moll's a'cold* - the excerpted mad-scene from his opera *A Harlot's Progress* was first heard at the Enescu Festival performed by Adela Zaharia in Summer 2017.

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# A Harlot's Progress

an opera in four acts

<b>Libretto</b>	Peter Ackroyd
<b>Duration</b>	2 hours 10 mins
<b>Orchestration</b>	2+pic.2.2.2+cbn/2222/timp.2perc/hp/str
<b>Commissioner</b>	Theater an der Wien

## Cast and characters

<b>Moll Hackabout</b> , a harlot	Coloratura Soprano
<b>'Mother' Needham</b> , a procuress	Mezzo-Soprano
<b>Kitty</b> , Moll's Maid	Mezzo-Soprano
<b>James Dalton</b> , a highwayman	Baritone
<b>Coachman/Officer/Jailam</b>	Bass
<b>Mister Lovelace</b> , Moll's 1 <sup>st</sup> keeper	Tenor

SATB chorus of traders, prisoner, prostitutes and unsavoury London-types

## Brief Synopsis

Faithfully adhering to Hogarth's six 1732 etchings of the same name, this opera in six scenes tells the story of the precipitous downfall of Moll Hackabout. The title role was created by renowned coloratura soprano Diana Damrau in a tour-de-force role that calls upon the full vocal and dramatic resources of this astonishingly gifted performer portraying Moll's journey from naïve to courtesan to syphilitic Drury Lane prostitute.

Moll Hackabout, the titular Harlot, arrives as an innocent in London and is taken into the 'care' of Mother Needham. A loathsome and sly character, Needham beguiles Moll with tales of rich gentlemen and a luxurious lifestyle. Moll falls for highwayman James Dalton whilst working as mistress to the lascivious Mr Lovelace and whore for Needham. The duality of her existence leads to heartbreak and ruin when she contracts syphilis, is imprisoned in Bridewell House of Correction, descends into madness and loses everything she ever loved apart from her daughter, then dies alone. It was never going to end well. Her final moments are captured through a formidable fifteen-minute aria, *Moll's a'Cold*; a remarkable technical and physical undertaking for the singer.



Scenes from the world premiere of *A Harlot's Progress*, Teater an der Wien (2013) © Werner Kmetitsch.

# A Christmas Carol (2013)

a chamber opera in five staves for solo tenor

<b>Libretto</b>	Simon Callow
<b>Duration</b>	2 hours 10 mins
<b>Orchestration</b>	2+pic.2.2.2+cbn/2222/timp.2perc/hp/str
<b>Commissioner</b>	Houston Grand Opera

## Brief Synopsis

Ebenezer Scrooge, a callous old miser, works in his counting-house on a freezing Christmas Eve. Scrooge reacts to all visitors with seething venom, spitting out 'Bah! Humbug!' bitterly in response. That night, Scrooge is visited upon by the ghost of his dead partner, Jacob Marley, burdened with heavy chains as punishment for his selfish deeds in life. He informs him that he will be visited by three Spirits over the coming three nights. The first, the Ghost of Christmas Past, takes Scrooge on a journey to Christmases of his youth including his engagement to Belle, who later leaves Scrooge when his desire for wealth overshadows his love for others.

On the second night, Scrooge is woken by the Ghost of Christmas Present. He watches the Cratchits joyfully prepare their meagre Christmas dinner but especially the little crippled Tiny Tim, whose kindness and humility warms his heart.

On the third night, Scrooge spies a shadowy, hooded figure approaching; the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. It conducts Scrooge to the home of the Cratchits who are mourning the tragic death of Tiny Tim. He is swiftly whisked to a churchyard where a grave bears his own name. He frantically vows to relinquish his uncaring ways and to honour Christmas in his heart all year round.

Awaking the next morning, and overjoyed that it is yet Christmas Day, Scrooge leaps out onto the streets to impart his new-found Christmas spirit.

# In Parenthesis (2016)

<b>Libretto</b>	E. Jenkins and D. Antrobus, after David Jones
<b>Duration</b>	1 hours 50 mins
<b>Orchestration</b>	2(afl)+pic.2(ca).2(bcl).2+cbn/2221/timp.2perc/hp/str
<b>Commissioner</b>	Nicholas John Trust With 14-18 NOW, WW1 Centenary Art Commissions, supported by the National Lottery through Arts Council England and the Heritage Lottery Fund. Premiered by Welsh National Opera

## Cast and characters

<b>Private John Ball</b>	high tenor
<b>Bard of Germania / Alice the Barmaid / The Queen of the Woods</b>	soprano
<b>Bard of Britannia / HQ Officer</b>	baritone
<b>Lieutenant Jenkins</b>	baritone
<b>Lance Corporal Lewis</b>	high baritone
<b>Sergeant Snell</b>	tenor
<b>Dai Great Coat</b>	bass
<b>The Marne Sergeant</b>	tenor
<b>Private Watcyn</b>	tenor
<b>Private Wastebottom</b>	bass
<b>German Soldier / Runner</b>	tenor

Female Chorus of Remembrance/Chorus of Dryads; Male Platoon Chorus

## Brief Synopsis

The action homes in on John Ball, a young Private in the Royal Welch Fusiliers; a clumsy, hapless soldier also possessed of moments of hallucinatory vision in which Celtic and mythical imagery consumes him. As his platoon marches toward the front line, his visions intensify until they take over the entire action of the opera at Mametz Wood, where he sees the Queen of the Woods and her Dryads bring death and destruction in their wake. By the end he is the sole survivor, Mametz is destroyed. In the spirit of the eternal cycle of destruction and regeneration, by dawn Ball sees the woodland beautifully regenerate and the fallen are garlanded with flowers by the Dryads.

# Jack the Ripper: The Women of Whitechapel (2019)

<b>Libretto</b>	Emma Jenkins
<b>Duration</b>	2 hours 15 minutes
<b>Orchestration</b>	2+pic.2(ca).2(bcl).2+cbn/2221/timp.perc+cimb/hp/str
<b>Commissioner</b>	English National Opera and Opera North

## Cast and characters

<b>Mary Kelly</b>	Coloratura Soprano	<b>The Writer</b>	Tenor
<b>Maud</b>	Dramatic Soprano	<b>Squiby</b>	Baritone
<b>Polly Nichols</b>	Soprano	<b>The Pathologist</b>	Baritone
<b>Annie Chapman</b>	Mezzo-Soprano	<b>The Coroner</b>	Bass-Baritone
<b>Liz Stride</b>	Soprano	<b>Man in Crowd</b>	Baritone
<b>Catherine Eddowes</b>	Soprano	<b>Magpie</b>	a girl (10-12 yrs old (non-singing))

Female chorus of prostitutes, women of East End of London, funeral mutes

Male chorus of labourers, policemen, funeral mutes

## Brief Synopsis

Mary and her grandmother Maud run a doss house in Whitechapel in London's East End, where the poor gather for rest. Mary and doss house regulars Annie (wished-for mother to Mary), Catherine and Liz (who have been earning substantial money posing for a photographer) befriend Polly, recently thrown out by her husband. Following the murder and autopsy identification of one of their own, the women seek solace and distraction in the local pub. At closing, Polly wanders off into the street by herself looking for a customer. She is consumed by the darkness of the street, prey to an unknown killer.

With a faceless, depraved murderer on the loose and an apathetic, corrupt police force indifferent to the women's plight, hysteria, fear and speculation grip the streets of the East End. Our band of working friends start to suspect every man they meet as they struggle to survive in this forgotten corner of industrial London.

# Stonewall (2019)

<b>Libretto</b>	Mark Campbell
<b>Duration</b>	1 hours 30 minutes
<b>Orchestration</b>	1+pic.1+ca.2(bcl).1/2.2.1+btbn.0/timp.perc/str(86442)
<b>Commissioner</b>	New York City Opera

## Cast and characters

<b>Maggie</b> , a butch lesbian of Irish descent	Mezzo-Soprano
<b>Carlos</b> , an English teacher	Baritone
<b>Andy</b> , a teenage runaway	Tenor
<b>Troy</b> , a straight go-go boy and hustler	Baritone
<b>Renata</b> ...by night; Maynard, a clerk by day	Tenor
<b>Edward</b> , a closeted financial advisor	Baritone
<b>Leah</b> , a Jewish lesbian	Coloratura Soprano
<b>Sal</b> , club manager with mafia connections	Bass
<b>Sarah</b> , a transgender hippie	Mezzo-Soprano/Countertenor
<b>Larry</b> , the deputy police officer	Tenor

**Named chorus roles:** Valerie (Renata's sister, a transvestite - baritone); The Principal (tenor); Police Officers: Williams (soprano) Economides (mezzo-soprano), Hennessey (tenor), Romano (tenor), Andrews (baritone), Cahn (baritone), Giordano (baritone); 'Man on Train' (baritone)

SATB chorus of patrons of the club: drag queens, street kids, lesbians, flaming queens; racially mixed and in their early 20s

## Brief Synopsis

Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the event, Iain Bell and Mark Campbell bring STONEWALL to the City Opera stage in this moving and explosive new American opera that captures the rage, grit, humor and, finally, hope of the LGBTQ community's uprising in a Greenwich Village dance club on one hot night in June 1969.

The work follows a diverse group of characters whose lives collide at that pivotal moment in history when the police push them too far and they find the courage to fight back.

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