

Last Days review - Leith's opera is bleak and beautiful

★★★★☆



📷 Hiding away from his fame and those who want a piece of him... Agathe Rousselle as Blake (centre) with Kate Howden, Seumas Begg, Henry Jenkinson and Mimi Doulton in *Last Days* at the Linbury, London. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

Linbury, Royal Opera House, London

Oliver Leith's new work, based on Gus Van Sant's fictionalised account of the final days of Kurt Cobain, keeps its audience at arm's length, allowing its dense score to articulate and drive the drama

Conventionally, suicides provide opera with their dramatic climaxes – think *Tosca*, *Götterdämmerung*, *Werther*. But in [Oliver Leith's](#) *Last Days*, the suicide of the central character *is* the opera, an inevitability from the opening moments until the bleak, frozen ending 90 minutes later. Its starting point was [the 2005 film by Gus Van Sant](#) from which Leith and his librettist Matt Copson borrowed both title and plot, and which in its turn was loosely based on the final days of [Kurt Cobain](#), lead singer of Nirvana.



📷 Agathe Rousselle and Sion Goronwy in *Last Days*. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

Van Sant's central character is Blake, a rock musician freshly out of rehab who is hiding away from his fame and the friends, fans and managers who all want a piece of him. Leith and Copson make Blake a non-singing role, which is taken in gender-blind casting by the French actor Agathe Rousselle. He says very little in the opera that's intelligible - the surtitles decipher his enigmatic mumblings. To a greater or lesser extent all the other onstage characters sing - a delivery driver (Mimi Douulton), a superfan (Patricia Auchterlonie), two evangelising Mormons (Seumas Begg and Kate Howden), and a private investigator (Sion Goronwy) hired to locate Blake. His manager is just heard on the telephone, as the gabbling, pre-recorded voice of a Montana cattle auctioneer.

With Blake as the inert focus, all these hangers-on gradually generate chaos around him. The production (a joint effort between the Royal Opera and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where Leith is composer in residence) is directed by Copson and Anna Morrissey, with designs by Grace Smart and over-size costumes by Balenciaga. It depicts that grungy chaos all too easily, leaving little space for characterisation; you watch the disintegration without ever becoming emotionally engaged; Blake himself, in Rousselle's wonderfully controlled performance, seems untouchable, and in the last resort unsave-able from himself.

▲▲ In Rousselle's wonderfully controlled performance, Blake seems untouchable and unsave-able from himself

But as it always should be in an opera, what articulates and drives the drama is the score. Most of Leith's vocal lines are deliberately dislocated, their stresses never falling where you expect them to, though there are some exceptions - a couple of ensembles, in which the voices dovetail in moments of touching beauty, and a soaring verismo-style number "Non Voglio Mai Vedere Il Sole Tramontare", composed by Leith and pre-recorded by the US singer-songwriter Caroline Polachek, that's first heard as Blake absently plays an unmistakably Nirvana-like riff on his guitar in the opera's only explicit Cobain reference.



📷 Agathe Rousselle and Henry Jenkinson in *Last Days*. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

Conducted by Jack Sheen, the orchestra combines the strings of 12 Ensemble with the percussion and keyboards of GBSR Duo, George Barton and Siwan Rhys to provide textures that range from dense dark harmonies to single instrumental lines, which are enhanced by sampled sounds ranging from faux birdsong to breakfast cereal being poured into a bowl. In the final minutes of the opera, though, all that's left is a bleak procession, in a work that, for all its beauties, otherwise keeps its characters strictly at arm's length.

● At the Linbury theatre until 11 October.

In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123, or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at befrienders.org.