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War and Peace

By Andrew Clark

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It is a popular misconception that masterpieces arrive in fixed form, like a gift from heaven. Some of the most successful operas - *Carmen*, *Don Carlos*, *Boris Godunov*, to name but three - have extremely messy histories, and until recently no one bothered if the edition was bowdlerised. What great composers have always wanted is to communicate. If the performance breathes style and conviction, it doesn't matter which version you use. It's only modern musicologists who believe in the possibility of an "original" text and its superiority over established versions. Bizet, Verdi and Mussorgsky never heard the so-called original versions of the operas cited above: practical considerations came first.

This is the context in which we must judge *War and Peace*, a collaboration between Scottish Opera and music academies in Glasgow, Russia and Armenia. It is billed as "the world premiere of the original version". But Prokofiev's opera went through so many versions - none of which he heard complete - that it's hard to credit this one with greater authenticity than the others. It is "edited" by Rita McAllister: she has pieced it together from manuscripts, orchestrating parts of the war scenes that Prokofiev wrote in piano score and axed at the behest of his Soviet minders. This version omits the ball scene and the Fili scene in which Field Marshal Kutuzov sings his paean to Moscow. It also knocks an opera of four hours down to two and a half.

Does it work? It has greater consistency than the established version, which hardly justifies its length. But it misses some wonderfully rousing moments in the second half. What validates it is the all-round quality of performance, staged by Irina Brown, designed by Chloe Lamford and conducted by Timothy Dean. With a cast of students and young professionals, the opera's contrast of young and old personalities must be taken as read, and some voices are underprojected, but the overall effect is fluent and atmospheric. Aleksey Gusev's virile Napoleon steals the show; Maria Kozlova's Natasha and Aram Ohanian's Kutuzov also show promise.

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