

# Chess *Andersson, Ulvaeus*

ENGLISH NATIONAL OPERA

Music ★★★★★  
Staging ★★★★★

Review by Antonia Couling  
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Brinkhoff/Mögenburg

With its soaring melodies, wide range of musical colour and lush, imposing orchestration, *Chess* is a musical with operatic dimensions, so the addition of English National Opera's orchestra and chorus to this semi-staged production by Laurence Connor seemed the perfect fit

**C**hess has had a chequered (sorry) career as a stage show, but its genius as one of musical theatre's most sophisticated pieces cannot be denied. This lies partly in that it obeys operatic rules, employing five lead vocal types, ending in tragedy and taking on an exploration of universal truths – both personal and global. But it is for Tim Rice's deft libretto that

*Chess* is so highly rated, coupled with the beautiful score by Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus (the male component of ABBA). It is a show packed full of vocal gems with several stonking solos for all members of the fragile quartet of protagonists.

The orchestra (conducted by John Rigby) took centre stage, suspended mid-way up the backdrop, behind a gauze of

scattered neon squares on which projections provided background to the setting of this 1970s Cold War story of alliances and betrayals. The projections were effective, with shadow puppets to illustrate the 'Story of Chess' and, later, historical film bites of US/Soviet historical competition – the space race, oil fields, Reagan, Nixon, Afghanistan... Sitting as we are today on

▼ Check mate: Tim Howar as Freddie Thumper and Michael Ball as Anatoly Sergievsky



BILL KNIGHT



▲ Tim Howar brings the right intensity to his role

the possible cusp of a new cold war, this suddenly became deeply poignant.

Some sections were taken at a more sedate pace than in previous productions: the introductory ‘Merano’ and ‘The Arbiter’ felt in need of a little more punch to make the rock/classical contrast really hit home. Nevertheless, the added orchestral heft made the show, and the ENO chorus clearly relished their involvement.

The aria ‘Anthem’ has long been a feature of concerts and recordings for Michael Ball, playing the Russian defector Anatoly Sergievsky. To see it in context was even more powerful. There is wry humour in this piece and Ball was alone in his ability to put this across with wit and charisma. Tim Howar as the American chess player Freddie Thumper came across as a bit of a caricature, but delivered a wonderfully executed ‘Pity the Child’ which had just the right intensity for this challenging song. The show’s most well-known number ‘Bangkok’ had everything thrown at it – fire, projections, dragons, aerial artists, ladyboys and full-on dance routines, even if it was semi-staged.

Cassidy Janson as Anatoly’s lover Florence lacked engagement and also sounded a little hollow. However, her ‘Nobody’s Side’ brought the house down and ‘I Know

Him so Well’ had the entire auditorium wallowing in tears. Molokov, Anatoly’s second, sang with an assured bass, and had a strong, threatening presence.

Alexandra Burke as Anatoly’s abandoned wife Svetlana, was a revelation. She connected directly with the audience and matched the vocal dynamics and charisma of Ball. I had the feeling we were witnessing something great, particularly in her first solo, ‘Someone Else’s Story’. Her voice is deeply beautiful and emotional, particularly her textured lower register – a tonic in these days of ever-more two-dimensional singing in musicals. The finale of the interwoven ‘Endgame’ and ‘You and I’, utilising full chorus, all characters and the fatal couple, makes for an anguishing end to this fine work, dripping in inevitability – of the failure of Anatoly and Florence’s relationship, and of the cycle and recycle of world events, political games and the victims of them. [ON](#)



▲ Michael Ball explores the wry humour in *Chess*



▶ A revelation:  
Alexandra Burke as Svetlana