

vocalism. The brothers, Iain and Alasdair, were sympathetically characterized by Andrew Dickinson and Douglas Nairne, while Shuna Scott Sendall made a breezy impact as their sibling Elsa. Vaila, the woman at the heart of the love-triangle, drew a performance of poise from Laura Margaret Smith, while Jonathan Best conjured a Dutchman-like presence from the Sailor's terse appearances. Stout's solos were an entertainment in themselves, while Williams conducted with palpable feeling.

ANDREW CLARK

Strange Ghost

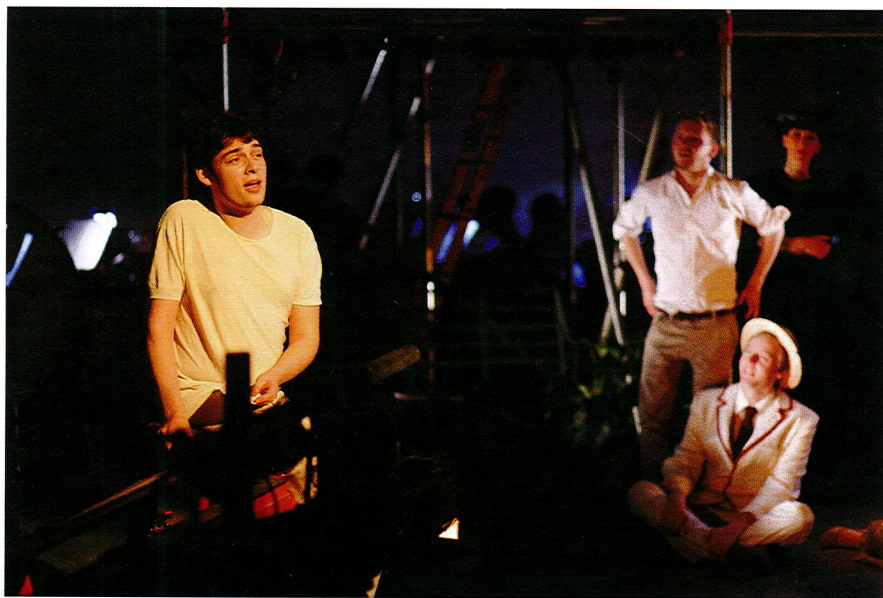
Festival Theatre, Cambridge Buddhist Centre, December 12

David Earl's path to commemorating the centenary of Rupert Brooke's death in his fourth opera, *Strange Ghost*, can be traced across his recent compositional output. Almost a decade ago, while living in the poet's beloved Grantchester, he began his Brooke song cycle *The Ungathered Blossom of Quiet*. He followed it up with *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*, a 20-minute cantata for baritone, chorus and orchestra, but perhaps found that opera would be the most natural medium for exploring the poet's contradictory and emotionally complicated nature. Brooke's death in April 1915 from blood poisoning following a mosquito bite, on board the ship that was taking him to fight in the Dardanelles, frames the opera, but the Prologue and final scene are among the shortest episodes in the piece; the intervening nine scenes explore important moments in his life.

The South African-born, Cambridge-domiciled pianist (active in London's major concert venues from the 1970s onwards) and composer has an extensive catalogue of works and this is his fourth opera, although the first to be staged. The tableaux form allows Earl freedom to embrace a wide range of musical styles, and though he never slips into pure pastiche, there are apt enough Edwardian echoes in the piece, even shades of music-hall in a score that is not afraid of a good tune (the first arriving already in Scene 1, with 'Shall we walk along the hills of Heaven'). Earl displays verbal dexterity in his setting of the richly allusive libretto by Juliet Jenkin (who also collaborated on his third opera, *Mary and the Conqueror*, which depicts an afterlife meeting between Alexander the Great and one of his most devoted chroniclers, Mary Renault—a work crying out to be staged). The music slips seamlessly between arietta, parlando and chorus, and picks up greater variety in Act 2 with evocations of a voyage to the South Seas as well as military training in Blandford.

Yet it feels like a lot of music (in reality, only around two hours not counting the interval) when heard, as here, in a performance that seemed to churn along. The venue—one of only a few pre-Victorian theatres outside London, and celebrating its own bicentenary—proved interesting, but maybe its rare cyclorama worked against things in a performance that positioned the 26-member orchestra at the back of the stage, its sound projecting somewhat unrelentingly under the baton of Dominic Peckham, even here on the second night. Dionysios Kyropoulos's staging (in a scaffolding set by Vilokini Gail Abbott) was stark and simple, each scene opening with a black-and-white projection to suggest locale and the cast wearing vaguely period dress.

Some self-conscious acting suggested patches of inexperience among the cast, and indeed the piece really deserved a stronger performance. It was not hard to see why the handsome James Schouten had been cast as Rupert Brooke, but despite potential as an open-voiced lyric baritone, he all too frequently lived up to his surname. It's



■ James Schouten (l.) as Rupert Brooke in the premiere of David Earl's *'Strange Ghost'*

a demanding role, and scarcely offstage for long, but the musical burden wouldn't necessarily tire a baritone more accustomed to pacing himself. Schouten's voice—first heard unaccompanied—is basically likeable and warm, and he caught the strong intensity of the music in the scene of Brooke's emotional collapse after his rejection by Katherine 'Ka' Cox, but over the course of the evening his performance became wearying. Standing out among the cast of 13 (mostly doubling their brief roles with chorus duties) were the mezzo Jessica Lawrence-Hares (singing warmly as Ka Cox), the mezzo Ute Lepetit-Clare (whose Ruth Brooke, the poet's mother, was strongly characterized) and the bass Simon Bainbridge (incisive as Edward Marsh); Sally Cheng, Hazel Neighbour, Jonathan Miles and Peter Martin all made lively contributions. The most exciting voice was that of the soprano Goitsehang Lehobye, who appeared in a single but significant scene as Taatamata, the woman Brooke fell in love with in Tahiti. Lehobye sang Violetta and Maria Stuarda for Cape Town Opera last year and is clearly going places, but her diction needs attention—she could have been singing in Tahitian. Still, the lush tonal warmth she projected in Taatamata's languorous aria and in the work's big love duet showed just how much more operatic *Strange Ghost* could be.

JOHN ALLISON

Oronteia

La Nuova Musica at Wigmore Hall, London, December 14

Antonio Cesti (1623-1669)—Franciscan friar, tenor, organist—was also one of the leading composers of the mid 17th century, his operas lauded in the theatres of Venice, Rome, Florence, Innsbruck and Vienna. *Oronteia* was the box-office hit of its day, remaining popular for 30 years until its mixture of the mighty, the mundane and the outrageous fell victim to changing operatic tastes.