

The Arsonists

The Arsonists is a two-act chamber opera, lasting around 1 hour 50 minutes, applying techniques developed in the Northern Voices Opera project and expanding them to a full scale opera.

Context

Although some material in a few operas has exploited “non-standard” accents in English, this is the first time an entire opera has been written in a Northern English accent. The composition of the opera was sensitive to the speech rhythms and vowel content of Ian McMillan’s Barnsley-accented speaking voice.

Methodology and Outputs

The opera incorporated in altered form three of the four songs from the Northern Voices Opera Project, but the whole of the remaining material was composed to a new libretto commissioned from Ian McMillan. Ian read the libretto in his own accent, and recordings of this were made available (see item 1) and parts of the libretto were transcribed in the International Phonetic Alphabet (see item 2). In rehearsal University of Salford Sociolinguist Philip Tipton and the composer Alan Williams were available to give notes on pronunciation (see item 3).

Compositionally, the music was written with a wide variety of techniques in mind, from the overt parody of “Let us all increase our productivity” (see score, Item 4, p.188) to 12-note techniques combined with process music: in “Me emergency exit is blocked’ Frank’s awkwardness is signaled by angular serial material, but slowly revealed via an additive process (item 5, and score p.95)

A video summarizing the opera is offered as item 6.