

## Getty's Garsington garden party

Richard Morrison

Garsington Opera has finally found a new home on the Getty estate, and it's a real stunner.

It floats on stilts over the ha-ha like a great winged insect, glowing with translucent sliding screens, flanked by verandahs and little bridges. It seats 600 people, has a good orchestra pit, sizeable stage and full lighting rig. And from the top of its stalls punters will survey the finest vista in Buckinghamshire.

But the most remarkable aspect of this Japanese-style, indoor-outdoor "Opera Pavilion" is that each July it will be dismantled and put into storage until the following April, leaving not a clue that a five-week opera festival has just taken place. Welcome to Britain's newest theatre, which opens on June 2 as the home of Garsington Opera.

There was never much chance that Garsington — which attracts even grander picnic hampers and opera connoisseurs than Glyndebourne, if that's possible — would end up on a housing estate in Slough. But only 18 months ago that was starting to look like an option. Back in 2008, after the death of Leonard Ingrams, Garsington Opera's founder, his family gave the company three more seasons to find a new home. After more than two decades they wanted their picturesque Oxfordshire house to themselves again. Three years seemed plenty of time to find an alternative stately pile with a pretty garden attached. After all, *anyone* would jump at the chance to host thousands of opera-goers, singers, instrumentalists and stage hands each summer. Wouldn't they?

Not so, apparently. "We looked at 45 properties all over Oxfordshire, and some in Berkshire and Bucks as well," says Anthony Whitworth-Jones, Garsington's general director. "And we had serious discussions with three owners. With the last we actually reached agreement in principle. Then they pulled out. Suddenly we had nothing. We were facing our final season in Garsington and we were very worried." So Whitworth-Jones started revisiting places he had already seen. One was the Wormsley Estate, a vast tract of the Chilterns — 2,500 acres in all — bought in 1986 by Paul Getty Jr, and now owned by his son Mark.

"The first time we saw it we didn't think it was quite right. That was partly because we were still subconsciously clinging to an image of what we had at Garsington, even though we told ourselves not to do that! Wormsley seemed too open, too grand, too enormous." But with 45 fruitless viewings behind him, Whitworth-Jones warmed to Wormsley's charms the second time round. "We realised how limited we had been in our vision, and that this location would be magical."

It's certainly striking. Stand on the steps at the front of Robin Snell's Opera Pavilion, and the sheep-dotted fields and woods of the estate (famed for its red kites, deer and wallabies) stretch unbroken to the horizon. You could be in deepest Herefordshire, not five minutes from Junction 5 of the M40.

To your right is Paul Getty's first pride and joy: the immaculate cricket pitch that hosts top sides. To your left is his second: the library housing the collection that includes a 15th-century edition of Chaucer and a Shakespeare First Folio. And down in the valley is the lake and "secret" 18th-century garden. It's hard to imagine a more idyllic or quintessentially English setting. And what a place in which to have an interval picnic.

Such a setting was not easily won. "Negotiations with Mark Getty's managers were tough, but fair," Whitworth-Jones says. "We reached agreement only 12 months ago. So the whole project — architectural designs, planning permissions, fundraising and construction — has been completed within a year." At least the planning permission was easy, since there are no neighbours within miles

of where the opera will be. Very different from the fractious early years of Garsington, when the Ingrams seemed at perpetual loggerheads with their neighbours.

The lease, for which the company is paying what Whitworth-Jones calls a “commercial rent”, lasts 15 years — and Snell has designed his Opera Pavilion to last at least that long. After that? “I think there is a genuine desire on both sides for us to stay here for a long time,” Whitworth-Jones says. “Mr Getty says that he wants to develop the cultural side of activities on the estate.”

The overall cost of the project is £3 million, and one of the most impressive aspects is how the money was raised: entirely from private donations, and the overwhelming majority of these from individuals rather than corporate sponsors. “Nearly 500 people chipped in, with donations ranging from £25 to well into six figures,” Whitworth-Jones says. “When Glyndebourne built its new theatre, that was funded by its supporters, and the same is true here. It’s much the healthiest way. The audience feels a sense of ownership. And although we had virtually no corporate support for the building, we have lots for the performances — including one bank, Jefferies, that is supporting the whole season.”

That season looks intriguing. Garsington regulars will be hoping that the stage director Olivia Fuchs and conductor Martin André can repeat the success of their outstanding 2008 collaboration on Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress* when they open the season with *The Magic Flute*. After that, Whitworth-Jones pursues two special passions, with Rossini (*Il turco in Italia*) and Vivaldi (*La verita in cimento*, or *Truth put to the Test*). “A wonderfully dotty opera with some marvellous music,” he says. “And it continues our exploration of little-known Vivaldi works. In 2012, Olympic year, we are doing his *L’Olimpiade*.”

This is the fourth new opera house with which the 65-year-old has been involved. He was general director at Glyndebourne when the new opera house was built there. He then went to Dallas with the express purpose of building a new opera theatre. “But the funding wasn’t there and the project was delayed for so many years that I cut my losses and left.”

After that he migrated to Porto, where he opened the new Rem Koolhaas-designed Casa da Musica and programmed its first year. And thence to Garsington, where, as he points out, he will be neatly completing a circle. “Robin Snell, our architect, was the site architect for the Michael Hopkins opera house in Glyndebourne all those years ago. He seemed the ideal choice, first because he understood about summer opera festivals, and secondly because he’s had a lot of experience with temporary structures. And we are delighted with what he’s done. It’s of seriously good quality.”

All’s set, then, for opening night. But what of the question on every opera-lover’s lips? Will Garsington Opera for ever carry that name, even though it has severed its links with the village? “For ever I can’t possibly say,” Whitworth-Jones says. “But there are no plans to change the name. Our reputation is as Garsington. To forgo that would be lunacy.”

Garsington Opera ([garsingtonopera.org](http://garsingtonopera.org); 01865 361636) runs from June 2 to July 5. Booking opens Mon 18 April.