

# Garsington Opera moves to Wormsley

Brian Hick

Few international opera companies have the benefit of building a brand new theatre for themselves and for a small scale-company with a limited season to do so would appear to be an impossible undertaking. That Garsington Opera's move to Wormsley has been unbelievably successful on all counts is a tribute not only to the professionalism of the company but the quality of support and loyalty it has gathered to itself over the years of performing on Leonard Ingram's terrace in Garsington.

The Getty Estate at Wormsley, in a hanging valley just off the M40, could hardly be a better venue for summer opera. The long wooded drive from the main road leads you gently to the car parks beside the cricket pitch (the other main public access to the park lands) and further off to the walled gardens. The restaurant marques are pitched overlooking the wicket and behind them the curving lines of picnic tents overlook the lake and the deer park. Where Glyndebourne's grounds can sometimes seem a little crowded these days, Wormsley has room to spare for all. Given the potential distances, the availability of local students to trolley picnic hampers was an added, and very welcome, bonus.

The other surprise was the way the new theatre, potentially so stark in design, nestles snugly within a fold in the wooded banks beside the farm house, to the point where it is unseen from many angles across the park.

One of the great delights of opera at

Garsington had always been the views from the auditorium across the garden and the way these were used within productions. Almost by accident the new theatre has the same arrangement, with a formal garden leading off to the right of the audience – as at Garsington – and thick woodland on the other side. Two of this year's new productions made use of the gardens for extended entrances to fine effect, bringing a pleasant sense of continuity to the season.

The new theatre – or pavilion as it is more correctly described – has been created specifically for Garsington Opera, and is anything but a marquee with seats and a stage! Anthony Whitworth-Jones, General Director for Garsington Opera, had previously worked on the new Glyndebourne Opera House but this was a very different undertaking. The pavilion needed not only to be free-standing but easily de-commissioned and stored each year after the end of the season, but substantial enough to last for at least fifteen years. Robin Snell was invited to design the new building which appears to float above the surrounding landscape. There is a very practical reason for this. I was at the unfortunate enough to be present at the only performance ever to be rained off at Garsington – a *Fidelio* when the rain was so hard the music could not be heard and the orchestra pit became flooded. In the new pavilion, even the bottom of the orchestra pit is above ground level so there is no fear of flooding. Inside, the auditorium is a single room, with a single bank of seats

facing an open stage which had transparent sides. Obviously most productions will need settings of varying complexity, but the basic design is not so much of a theatre as of a concert hall which is open at the sides. This gives a sense of light and air which even the old house did not have. As the sun could cause a problem, though being the English countryside this will not necessarily happen, there are full height screens which can be easily and quickly moved to control the light which is allowed into the pavilion. The new seating is comfortable and there is better leg room than in the old house. The roof has been designed not only to withstand the weather but to cut out as much of the potential noise from rain as possible.

Outside, a terrace runs around the whole building with stairs and ramps approaching from the gardens. At the front there is a bar and a series of balconies, all under the wide sweeping roof above. The large set of stairs at the front of the house resemble the entrance to a Greek Temple – a fitting reflection not only of a Temple of the Arts but of the classical gardens that surround it.

And so to this year's new productions. Along with Richard Strauss, Rossini has become something of a house composer for Garsington, with a string of fine revivals, often opening our understanding to works unjustifiably ignored. There have certainly not been many recent productions of *Il Turco in Italia* that I am aware of and I suspect that many in the audience



Dusk descends



La Verità in Cimento

would be hearing it for the first time – and what a splendid piece it is. David Parry was clearly delighted with the new acoustic and found exemplary balance both within his orchestral soloists – some particularly fine bassoon playing from Philip Gibbon – and between pit and stage. The immediacy of the voices was unexpected. There is no sense of being outdoors here in terms of the acoustical ambiance and if it were not for the bird song which accompanies quieter moments one could easily be inside any modern opera house.

Lying somewhere between *commedia del arte* and early romanticism the plot of *Il Turco* need not concern us though the updating to the 1950s worked very well for the sparing heroines. Rebecca Nelsen's fiery Fiorilla was keenly matched by the more emotive Zaida of Victoria Simmonds, but it was the comedic work from Geoffrey Dolton which set the tone for the evening. Martin Duncan's approach allowed the humour to invade the music without ever upstaging it. This is not an easy thing to accomplish and all the more treacherous within a new venue. Francis O'Connor's giant billboard formed an impressive and flexible backing to the narrative.

The following night brought us Vivaldi's *La verità in cimento*, an even greater rarity than the Rossini, but surely one deserving a place alongside the Handel revivals we have experienced over the last decade. The presence of six soloists who can combine baroque ornamentation with emotionally complex characters would have been enough in itself. If we add to this Laurence Cummings' thrilling handling of the score, with its keen sense of pace and drive, the evening could not fail. Anyone who thinks that *da capo* arias should be truncated needs to hear Ida Falk Winland in full flow. Her presentation of Rosane was physically stunning and musically captivating. To put her alongside Diana Montague and Jean Rigby was to create some of the most impressive baroque singing I have come across. Not that the men were any less impressive, with James Laing's lyrical counter-tenor and the impassioned tones of Paul Nilon's Sultan Mamud.



Il Turco in Italia

David Freeman's production places the action within a timeless aristocratic winter, which required the singers to perform, on a hot summer's evening, in fur coats. At the side of the stage a gardener sat preparing vegetables and trimming flowers throughout the performance, a gentle reminder that while the aristocrats emote over their money the workers carry on regardless. Duncan Hayler's vast white greenhouse was an apt metaphor for the action and was finely lit, partly naturally in the first half, as the setting sun was allowed to stream between the shutters on the northern side.

What is one to do with *The Magic Flute*? A recent article in the *Independent* noted that it is misogynistic, racist and elitist, and while we seem to have dealt with the racist element by simply ignoring it – when did you last see a black Monostatos? – we have not yet addressed the other two problems. Olivia Fuchs' approach was to take it at face value and accept the misogyny. The opening scene brings us Tamio pursued by an army of women all offering him apples, and this theme continues throughout the evening. There is also an under-current of sadomasochism reflected in the leather costumes and Papagano's padlock, which again appears at odd moments throughout. Sarastro's court is a haven for hippies, while the Queen of the Night smokes joints. This works well up to



The Magic Flute

a point but even it cannot make sense of the trial scenes – which are here seen as something of a joke – or the final outcome. The only saving grace is William Berger's fine Papageno who treats it all with the contempt it deserves. It is often his barbed comments which make the most sense of a world where common sense seems to have been jettisoned in favour of political theory.

Thankfully the musical side went a good way towards taking our mind off of the work's innate problems. As noted Papageno was the musical heart of the evening, with strong input from Robert Murray as Tamino and Kim Sheehan as Queen of the Night. Evan Boyer's young and glib Sarastro suited the production as did Benjamin Bevan's school-masterly speaker. Sophie Bevan was presented with the Critics' Circle award on the final night for her Pamina. Martin Andre brought the best out of his orchestral forces and produced crisp rhythms and excellent pacing.

Next year, in a nod towards the Olympics, we will have a welcome revival of Vivaldi's *l'Olimpiade* directed by David Freeman and Offenbach's *La Perichole* conducted by David Parry. This season has lifted Garsington Opera onto a new level of excellence – long may it continue. ■

