

## Creative collaboration

### David Sawer and Rory Mullarkey in conversation with Fiona Maddocks, classical music critic of *The Observer*

Intrigue, love, lust, political corruption, murder. Garsington Opera's artistic director, Douglas Boyd, knows what he likes, at least when it comes to finding ingredients for a new opera. He had approached David Sawer, without any particular idea in mind, having long admired Sawer's skills as a theatre composer. Ever a keen devourer of unexpected foreign literature, Sawer had just been reading *The Skating Rink* (1993) by Robert Bolaño (1953-2003), and suggested Boyd try it too. Boyd was hooked.

'I think that, like me, Dougie felt there was something there,' Sawer recalls. 'Bolaño's novels have a tone and atmosphere which is hazy, the characters are flawed, nothing quite fits together. You're never completely sure what's happening, yet the people he creates are sharply defined and strong. Here, in *The Skating Rink*, there are three narrators, telling the story from their own viewpoints, which seemed a powerful basis for an opera.'

The Chilean Bolaño, novelist, poet and left-wing polemicist, died young leaving ten novels or novellas, among which *The Savage Detectives* is probably best known. Identifiable themes in his work, often called 'labyrinthine', include the relationship between literature and life, as well as those perennial riddles of love, violence, old age, death in all their particularity.

Described by the *New York Times* as 'the most significant Latin American literary voice of his generation', Bolaño always had a dedicated following, praised by the late Susan Sontag and likened to Borges. Yet he was not widely known here until English translations of his writings were published around a decade ago, soon after his death.

Bolaño lived variously in Chile, Mexico and finally Spain, where *The Skating Rink*, his first novel, is set – specifically on the Costa Brava north of Barcelona, in the fictional seaside town of Z. It can be identified as the Catalan town, Blanes, where the novelist lived, working initially as a rubbish collector, dishwasher and campsite custodian – like Gaspar in *The Skating Rink* – to subsidise his writing.

The story's essence is mysterious yet simple: Nuria, a young champion skater, is suddenly dropped from the Olympic team. A civil servant, obsessed with her irresistible beauty and athletic body, covertly uses official funds to build her an ice rink in a deserted mansion. Other characters become entangled, including Carmen, an ex-opera singer who has ended up on the streets as a vagrant, and her friend Caridad. The skating rink turns into the scene of a crime.

Sawer's opera is scored for large ensemble including flugelhorn, celesta and the ukulele-like, Chilean charango. 'Each act or scene is coloured differently. The opening act, seen from Gaspar's perspective, is mostly strings until the marching band arrives for the fiesta. Act Two – Remo's story – is darker, with an emphasis on soprano saxophone and low woodwind, while Act Three – the civil servant Enric's – gives prominence to the three brass players including euphonium.'

Excited though he is by the prospect of Garsington's indoor-outdoor theatre he is aware of its singular challenges. 'As I haven't got a big mass of orchestral sound, I've tried to blend the instruments in a very particular way to make the lines thicker, so that the music carries. It isn't a usual theatre acoustic. Relying on individual lines would mean the sounds would dissipate.' He has thought hard, too, about the theatre's physical character.

'There are no edges to the stage. It's indoors, yet with an outdoor feeling, with a close relationship between stage and audience. There's no "fourth wall" and you can't use flown-in scenery or, especially in the early part of the evening, lighting in the traditional sense. But there's an incredible immediacy from the start, as there's no proscenium arch.

He and Mullarkey, and director Stewart Laing, have conceived of the work more as an installation. Things happen more than once, from different perspectives. 'It's a bit cubist, filmic,' Sawyer says. 'At the start of each act there are monologues addressing the audience. Voices are absorbed into the action, like troubadours telling stories through song.'

Sawyer has composed scores for silent films, and many plays including *The Government Inspector* and *The Good Soul of Szechuan* (Young Vic); *Hamlet* (RSC); *The Blue Ball* (National Theatre); *Food of Love* (Almeida) and *Jackets* (Bush). Whether for stage or concert, his music is meticulous, fluid, precise, unexpected, without excess.

In addition to many concert works, from the early *Byrnan Wood* to the more recent *Bronze and Iron* for brass quintet (2013), Sawyer wrote his own libretto for *From Morning Till Midnight*, his 2001 opera for English National Opera based on a Georg Kaiser text. For the operetta *Skin Deep*, an Opera North commission, he worked with writer Armando Iannucci.

For Garsington he has collaborated with the award-winning playwright Rory Mullarkey, whose *Cannibals* made him the youngest writer ever to have his work staged at Manchester's Royal Exchange. Another career landmark was *The Wolf at the Door*, at the Royal Court in 2014. He wrote the text for Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Coraline*, premiered by the Royal Opera earlier this year.

He and Sawyer met for the first time only once *The Skating Rink* was becoming a reality. Composers and writers often need some interventionist match-making in order to find each other. The ideal person was Henrietta Bredin, Garsington Opera's programme editor and co-founder and former head of ENO's Contemporary Opera Studio. After a little behind-the-scenes magicking on her part, they were introduced through David Lan, artistic director of the Young Vic where Sawyer has often worked, especially on productions by Richard Jones.

Even when pushed, neither Sawyer or Mullarkey can recall anything but pleasure in this joint venture. 'It's been very peaceable! We emailed back and forth,' Mullarkey recollects. 'And we spent several days together creating a detailed plan, filleting things out, cutting, tightening. We discussed the style and kind of language and structure.' In a quest for authenticity, Mullarkey travelled to Spain and went to the specific camp site named in the novel, where Gaspar, the poet who writes no poetry, works, and which Remo the novelist – Nuria's boyfriend – owns.

'Although I wasn't thinking about how David's music would be *per se*,' Mullarkey says, 'I was conscious of writing in a more economical way, as you have to in a libretto. Then I sent a sample scene song. If David hadn't liked it, things might have ended rather differently...'

'Luckily it was exactly what I wanted,' Sawyer responds. 'For me it's chiefly about structure. You're not telling the story through words. It's blocks of activity, capturing the quality of an unreliable narration. We came up with a tripartite structure, each part seen through the eyes of a different character, rather than inter-spliced as in the novel.'

Should we expect to hear songs or arias? Having a character who is an opera singer offers its own gift, as Sawyer acknowledges. 'Yes, Carmen has two songs, they're passionate, and reveal her personality and relationships. All the formal songs in the opera, including the karaoke in the finale, are about love and emotion. Which is what the whole piece is about really. It's about people losing what they find.'

The one who thinks he can get what he wants, the sex-obsessed Remo, is actually left alone in the end. 'But after all the turmoil, some of the characters end up having a future together,' Sawyer offers, reassuringly.

Rather like *Così fan tutte*?

'No, more like *Pelléas et Mélisande*,' Sawyer remarks with a delphic grin.  
'The ending is enigmatic, slightly frozen.'

Given the opera's title, this is entirely to be expected.