Welsh National Opera at Liverpool Empire

by Denis Joe October 2011

Mozart: Don Giovanni
Rossini: The Barber of Seville
Janáček: Katya Kabanova

Sadly, the Welsh National *Opera* only visit Liverpool for one season in a year, and is one of the highlights of the year. Opera in Britain is really strong with regional companies such as Welsh National Opera, Opera North and Scottish Opera consistently produce seasons of the highest quality, bringing neglected works to the public. Opera has had a reputation for being an elitist art form, but since the late 1980s, when I first started to go to see live opera, it was not unusual to see young people in jeans and t-shirts in the audience. The idea that the entrance fee is prohibitive is also a myth as it is no more expensive than a football match and far cheaper than going to see a band at some local stadium.

Opera is said to be the highest of art forms, and unlike a piece of theatre or a film, there are far more variables that go into producing an opera. Although in any one piece of work there are far more things that could go right or wrong, there is so much insight to be gained from opera. It so happens that there are also three exceptional masterpieces of the opera canon and we are pretty fortunate in this part of the world, when it comes to being served opera. Opera North

regularly put on works at the Lowry theatre in Salford and WNO visit Liverpool Empire , both excellent venues for opera.

The themes that runs through these three operas - ***Don Giovanni***, ***The Barber of Seville*** and ***Katya Kabanova***
deal with challenge and change, presenting to us, not only different worlds but also the opportunity to look at our own world.

Don Giovanni

Whilst *Don Giovanni* remains one of the most famous and much performed operas in the repertoire (as well as a personal favourite), it is not without its flaws and it takes an excellent production, such as the Welsh National Opera's, to highlight the weaknesses. Without doubt, Mozart's opera certainly became the standard by which future operas would be judged, especially those of the Romantic composers. It is strong on dramatics and though the opera is seen as 'opera buffa' I feel that is wrong. The planning of arias, duets, etc., may follow the opera buffa template, but the musical keys and the seriousness of the story is hardly something that can be seen as a laughing matter.

Though the overture opens in D minor, a key associated with serious emotions, such as revenge, the second section of the overture is far brighter, suggesting optimism. Much is made of the fact that *Don Giovanni* seems to go against the ideas of the Enlightenment that we associate with Mozart, especially the concept of a Hell. The idea of damnation, which seems to dominate the opera, chides with the Enlightenment idea of Man making his own destiny. Yet I think that there is too much of a literal reading put into this.

The story of Don Giovanni (or Don Juan) was seen as out-dated when Mozart adapted it, and many productions of the story at the time, preferred to leave out the Damnation scene - as being steeped in Medieval superstition. In the WNO programme Nicholas Till provides an overview of how the Damnation scene was viewed. Till may have a point when he argues that Mozart was reflecting the concerns of thinkers such as Locke and Kant, who were apprehensive about secularity creating a moral bonding of society, and how the statesman Josef von Sonnenfels felt that religion was the most reliable manner of maintaining that moral bind. Yet it could just as well be argued that Mozart, and the librettist da Ponte, were suggesting that the damnation is man-made. Giovanni refuses the opportunity of salvation from the Commendatore, yet it is not the physical being that damns Giovanni to hell but a statue: a man-made object.

From the opening scene where Giovanni, disguised as his friend Don Ottavio in order to seduce Ottavio's fiancé, Donna Anna, we are in serious territory. Some commentators suggest that the attempted 'seduction' is really an attempted 'rape' (the synopsis in the programme uses that word), but I think that by using the term 'rape', there is a total misreading of the opera. Don Giovanni is a libertine (perhaps an example of 'too much freedom'?), but his attitude towards women (wonderfully captured by David Soar as Leporello in the 'Catalogue' aria in scene two), is one borne out of his aristocratic position. Don Giovanni is a 'gentleman', and da Ponte and Mozart fully portray this, and he would not find any need to force himself on a woman as, he believed, his charm (and social standing) sufficed. The near seduction of Zerlina, and her obvious willingness to accept Giovanni's false promise of marriage, later in the first Act, only seems to add to the image of Giovanni as a serial seducer of women rather than a rapist.

The Barber of Seville

One of the funniest stories about Rossini and *The Barber of Seville* chimes so well with today's 'radicals' who make such a big deal out of abundance and showiness. At the premiere of *The Barber of Seville*, in 1816, Rossini chose to wear a brown suit with 'walnut sized' gold buttons as conductor. Already the composer, Giovanni Paisiello, was having popular success with his version of Beaumarchais's comedy, and Paisiello's followers did not take too kindly to this young upstart using the same source for his opera. Unable to find fault with Rossini's version they chose to attack him for his display of ostentation instead.

Today we know the story through two famous operas, Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* (which WNO are producing for their Spring 2012 season, unfortunately it is not coming to Liverpool) is the other. There is a tendency to compare both operas, with Rossini's seen as second best for its perceived lack of seriousness. I think this is unfair because both operas are completely different. Whereas Mozart's looks at social divisions through human emotions, Rossini presents us with an opera that stresses the changing structure of power relations and this is particularly noticeable in the fact that money, as opposed to property, is seen as the source to social success [for a useful explanation of the distinction between property and wealth it is worth reading *The Public and Private Realm* in *The Human Condition* by Hannah Arendt].

Mozart wasn't rejecting the raising social issues (*Don Giovanni* is testament to that), but whereas Mozart lived during a period of the birth of revolutionary movements in Europe, Rossini was, like Beethoven, an ardent supporter of the ideals of the early Napoleon Bonaparte. This was reflected in some of the subjects he chose to set to music such as the nationalist
Mos
é in Egitto
and
Guillaume Tell
, for instance.

The Barber of Seville was still seen as a radical topic. As with Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, Figaro is a servant of sorts, but seeks every opportunity to better himself and the way to do this is through accumulating money. Figaro does not help the Count of Almaviva out of the kindness of his heart, he does so only when promised gold by the Count (
all'idea di quel metallo

). But this is not something that is frowned upon, like the musicians, earlier on in Act 1, who help the Count to serenade Rosina, he expects to be paid for his services. We are left in no doubt that Figaro is the hero of the opera. Nothing happens without his direction. In this production the baritone Jacques Imbrailo, in the role of Figaro, cuts a handsome figure and has a beautifully toned voice.

It takes an opera such as *The Barber of Seville* to make you fully appreciate the art of opera. The set is a traditional one as are the costumes, and the libretto is an excellent translation by Robert David Macdonald. I first saw *The Barber of Seville* in a production by Opera North, about 20 years ago and I think that the translation then is the one used for this production (Opera North, along with Vancouver Opera, are co-producers for this production), certainly Rosina's aria, *Una voce poco fa*, sounded familiar.

Above all it is the stamina of the lead roles that amazes. Rossini placed great demands on his singers and wrote some arias (as is a tradition of Opera) in order for a particular singer to display the widest range possible. Some singers excel in roles such as those in Wagner operas, which demand a great deal of staying power. *The Barber of Seville* makes great demands on vocal dexterity and this is much the case with this opera. Whilst the music and singing is 'accessible', I doubt that singers are put through their paces in 'modern' opera as much as they are in this. Even the chorus has great demands placed upon them, particularly the finale of Act 1.

It makes it difficult to select a particular singer when you have a cast as strong as this and Rossini supplied the singers with some excellent arias, duets, etc. The idea of the opera as a spectacle is brought home by having a small audience, made up of members of the chorus, on

stage, who also lead the applause after each song.

The Barber of Seville is the one opera that I would recommend to anyone who is new to the art. Whilst it is very comical it also has some truly beautiful and tender moments. It is an opera that makes you leave the theatre with a smile on your face and ... yes ... makes you forget the bad things that are happening in the world. It also has some of the most memorable music. Even though it is in many ways more complex than, say, atonal music, it is so infectious that you find yourself humming the tunes long after you can remember where they came from.

Katya Kabanova

Welsh National Opera are certainly taking the lead in producing opera by Janáček - their production of *Jenůfa* a couple of years back, was excellent, and this ***Katya Kabanova*** continue s that trend. Janáček was moved to compose the opera after seeing a performance of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly.*
Puccini was one of the most successful composers of
Opera Verismo
, as his operas featured real characters and real emotions. Some of his operas, such as
La Boheme
were seen as outrageous in their day - indeed
Madama Butterfly
struck many as anti-American for its portrayal of the raffish Pinkerton.

Whilst Janáček's opera can be seen as *Opera Verismo*, it is very different from anything the Italian composer could produce. Whereas Puccini could cover the brutality of the story with

some of the most beautiful and heart-wrenching music imaginable, the Slavic tonal system tends to emphasise the rhythms of music rather than the melody and, as such, much of the music of many East European composers can prove difficult for those used to a more melodic approach. The inclusion of Stravinsky's
Rites of Spring
in Walt Disney's
Fantasia
may have made that particular work better known to Western audiences, but it has done little to make the rhythmic-driven compositions of many Slav composers any more popular.

Janáček is one of those composers whose every note of music has stayed with me over the years. I can't think of any piece of his music that I dislike, but if his music may seem, on first hearing, to be 'difficult, then *Katya Kabanova* is his most accessible composition. The story is based on the play *Groza* (translated as 'thunderstorm' but can also mean 'terror') by the 19th century Russian Realist playwright A N Ostrovsky. It concerns a married woman's love for another man and how that man leaves her, leading to her drowning herself in the Volga.

The story itself sounds straight forward yet we are left in no doubt about where our sympathies should lie: with Katya. Katya lives in a town with her husband Tichon and her mother in law, a tyrannical matriarch Kabanicha, who dominates the opera and whose presence is felt even when the character is not on stage.

The moral vindictiveness is expressed in the opening scene set in a café. Katya, Tichon and Kabanicha enter the café and find a table, having just come from church, and Kabanicha chastises Tichon, saying that he no longer loves her since marrying Katya. Kabanicha's voice raises and other patrons shift in their seats with obvious embarrassment. The scene, which begins amicably enough, slowly descends into an unnerving ambience. The credit for the power

of the scene lies very much with the mezzo soprano Leah-Marian Jones, whose acting and singing create an incredible tension that sometimes threatens to overwhelm even the orchestra.

Tichon has had to leave the area for a business trip and Katya, devotedly religious, becomes aware of her temptation to commit adultery. When Tichon has left, Kabanicha rebukes Katya for her lack of proper emotion. Katya later meets with Boris and they go for a midnight swim in the Volga. They sing a wonderful duet towards the end of Act 2 that sounds, at times, like something from a Viennese operetta. But that is the nearto a Puccini sound that Janáček gets in this opera. There is no let-up in the emotional tension throughout, and Katya's eventual suicide is almost a relief. Even when there is no-one on stage and the orchestra are playing, Janáček never allows the temperature to drop. The prelude between the last two scenes is one of the most powerful experience I've known in a theatre.

The design of the stage was a stroke of genius. Instead of curtains on left and right opening and closing we had three white screens: left and right and one from top to bottom. What this does is to make the stage seem smaller and it is another reminder of the contracting world that will eventually suffocate Katya. The costumes were turn-of-the 20th century bourgeois, and the stage, though sparse. seemed realistic. The acting was outstanding and the orchestra sounded every bit as good as any I've heard on recordings. This was a thrilling experience, but sadly, the theatre was less than half full.

Welsh National Opera What's On