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Moon Over Mozart

Peter Sellars surprises fans at Glyndebourne

By Andrew Moravcsik

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Aug. 11 issue — In opera festivals, like so much else in contemporary Europe, Britain stands apart. Continental productions are staged in the palaces of Salzburg and Aix, but England's flagship festival, Glyndebourne, takes place in a pint-size opera house erected (in the 1930s), when a dotty (squire) added it to his country manor. The festival, which runs this year until Aug. 31, retains a quintessentially English combination of informality and exclusivity. At intermission, patrons in formal dress stroll manicured lawns. Some play croquet. Most spread extravagant picnics, traditionally topped off with strawberries and cream.

THIS YEAR SOMETHING has disturbed the bucolic buffet. Peter Sellars, the enfant terrible of stage directors, is back. As a Harvard undergraduate in the late 1970s, he shocked his fellow students by staging Shakespeare in a swimming pool. Ten years later he achieved renown by modernizing Mozart. "The Marriage of Figaro" became class warfare atop the Trump Tower. Don Giovanni was portrayed as a drug dealer in the South Bronx. And "Cosi Fan Tutte" became the bitter joke of a disabled Vietnam vet, played out in a Long Island diner. Each production was staged with a dark, radical edge, critical of modern America. But each also demonstrated unparalleled sensitivity to the nuance of Mozart's musical characters.

Now in his mid-40s, Sellars is as provocative—and sure-footed—as ever. At Glyndebourne this year he's revived his 1996 production of George Frideric Handel's "Theodora," about the fourth-century Christian martyr who was put to death for refusing to worship the Roman gods. Under Sellars's direction, the opera becomes not only gripping drama but also biting criticism of modern-day minority persecution: Roman soldiers in 21st-century jumpsuits brandish machine guns, a cynical president in a power suit signs the death warrant and the title character dies via lethal injection.

Even more radically, he takes a crack at Mozart's first operatic masterpiece, "Idomeneo." Written when the composer was just 24, it tells the mythological story of the mistreatment of a Trojan princess by the Greeks. As an opera seria—in which characters sing florid arias in breeches and powdered wigs—it would seem unpromising terrain for radical political commentary.



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Undaunted, Sellars sets “Idomeneo” in modern postwar Iraq. Big sponsors fled what seemed a certain scandal. Greek warriors have been transformed into GIs, and casualties are carried off in body bags while Trojan women cower in burqas. King Idomeneo rules as an American politician in a dark suit, sporting a Stars and Stripes button on his lapel. The stage seems set for three hours of artistic anti-Americanism—hardly an uncommon spectacle in Britain this summer.

But Sellars surprises yet again: instead of a condemnation of U.S. foreign policy, he portrays something far more in keeping with Mozart’s own Enlightenment optimism. Under the brilliant baton of Sir Simon Rattle, the production’s theme is multicultural reconciliation: love and tolerance triumphs over the clash of civilizations. By the final curtain, soldiers and civilians, Muslims and Christians intermingle in a joyful dance.

Critics and fans have grumbled that Sellars has lost his nerve. But he’s simply transcended it, grasping something essential about modern Britain: it has become a nation of immigrants. Amid all the ethnic restaurants around suburban London serving Indian, Chinese and Middle Eastern food, one sign stands out: Chinese food—fish and chips. It will take decades for the world’s nationalities truly to blend in this way, but Mozart’s youthful vision of multicultural harmony has perhaps never been more relevant.

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