

Love is all you need

Steamy, erotic and full of surreal humour, a Ravel double bill at Glyndebourne seduces our opera critic

Hugh Canning Published: 12 August 2012

Glyndebourne's season began, back in May, with one of the most shaming flops in its recent history: a clunky, ideas-free staging of Janacek's life-cycle masterpiece, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, by the theatre director Melly Still.

However, over the wet, sodden summer, things have steadily improved, with a scintillating revival of Rossini's *La Cenerentola*; a solid reprise of David McVicar's grungy, sarf-London *La bohème*, with a likeable young cast; and a highly serviceable new *Figaro*, by Michael Grandage, that should do the festival and tour proud for years to come.

With its last new production of the season, Glyndebourne triumphs: a double bill of Ravel's two entirely characteristic yet contrasting one-act operas, *L'Heure espagnole* (*The Spanish Hour*, or *Spanish Time*) and *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (*The Child and the Magic Spells*). They were not conceived as a double bill — indeed, they appeared almost 15 years apart, in 1911 and 1925 — but they make a satisfying pairing.

Although Ravel retained a child-like quality to his personality throughout his life, both of these operas are decidedly adult pieces: the “Spanish” one especially so, its text taken from a saucy Franc-Nohain farce about a bored clockmaker's wife, Concepcion, who uses his absence on business to entertain two admirers, the financier Don Inigo Gomez and the effete poet Gonsalve. Her trysts are interrupted by a muleteer, Ramiro, who has dropped in to have his watch fixed, but finds himself used as a removal man, carrying grandfather clocks — sometimes containing her secreted lovers — up to her bedroom. She so admires his muscular physique and vigour that she decides to invite him to her boudoir without a clock, leaving Inigo and Gonsalve to stew in their little horological prisons.

Ravel's take on one of the oldest *commedia dell'arte* yarns in the book — it is essentially the same story as the play of the unfaithful Colombina at the climax of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* — is one of his finest scores, revelling in his Spanish heritage. (His beloved mother was Basque by origin.) And it is perhaps the filthiest opera in the standard repertoire: double entendres about *pendula* (read *male pudenda*) pepper almost all of Concepcion's nudge-nudge encounters.

For a composer who, allegedly, had no sex life, Ravel, like Handel — another of classical music's confirmed bachelors who created sexy operas — clearly had a vivid imagination. *L'Heure espagnole* is one of his most unashamedly erotic scores (but think of *Bolero*, *La Valse*, *Shéhérazade*, all of them about steamy physical love), and Kazushi Ono, conducting the London Philharmonic, leaves you in no doubt of it, evoking the sensual atmosphere of southern Spain with visceral rhythms and ravishing textures. It's worth going to Glyndebourne for the orchestral playing alone.

Laurent Pelly's staging is a reworking of a production first seen at the Paris Opera. Caroline Ginet, one of the original designers, has adapted a set she created with Florence Evrard for this Glyndebourne outing. Pelly updates the action to the 1960s — his own costume designs fit Gonsalve out in a flowery shirt and orange bell-bottoms — and the clockmakers' shop is a-tick with timepieces of all shapes and sizes, which all go haywire as Concepcion's sexual temper rises. If the humour is broader, the innuendo laid on more thickly, than the fastidious Ravel would have expected, it suits the chosen period of free love. What some commentators see as a misogynist portrayal of the heroine seems less so when updated, especially in the entrancing voice and person of the French mezzo Stéphanie d'Oustrac, whose savour of the text and relish of its double meaning are almost pornographic.

Two of her countrymen, François Piolino and Paul Gay, are ideally cast as the husband and the banker, while the Canadian baritone Elliot Madore also sings idiomatic French as the hunky muleteer. His acting doesn't need to be so relentlessly goofy, but this is an appealing British debut and he has the physique du role with knobs on. Only Alek Shrader's Gonsalve seems out of his element, a lyric rather than a young character tenor.

This rising American is the only one of the *Heure* quintet who does not appear in the succeeding child's fantasy adventure, where the creatures and objects he has abused and injured take their revenge before granting him forgiveness when he shows kindness and remorse. *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* is at once a challenge and a gift to a director and designer. Pelly's chic animal costumes make one wish that he had been assigned Janacek's woodland opera at Glyndebourne, too, while Barbara de Limburg's sets are among the most beautiful seen here in the past two decades.

Khatouna Gadalia's diminutive (male) child is dwarfed by a huge table and chair, and by a forbidding *maman* who glides in like a giant mechanical Disney Cinderella doll. The imagination of the succeeding scenes leaves one wide-eyed with wonderment: the huge *fauteuil* and *bergère* chairs, with the singers dressed and made up in the same fabric; the shepherds and shepherdesses who seem to emerge from the paper that the child has torn off the wall; the rutting cats (to music that makes Strauss's depictions of lovemaking in *Der Rosenkavalier* seem tame); and the hilarious jazz duet of the teapot (Piolino) and the *tasse chinoise* (Elodie Méchain), the former saucily dipping his spout over her rim. All of this makes for a breathtaking spectacle. Not since Peter Hall's iconic staging of Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 31 years ago, has the Glyndebourne stage been graced by anything as beautiful as the moonlit forest scene. The child tends the wound of the nightingale (sung by the dazzling Kathleen Kim, who also sings his fairy-tale princess, and tantalises him as fire, rather than the squirrel), suggesting another erotic subtext, but the final image of the child looking back at the house to see *maman* (Méchain) comfortably looking out of the window is a heart-stopping one.

This is Glyndebourne operating once again at world-class level, and is by some distance the most captivating staging of this magical opera I have seen. If there are tickets left for the remaining performances this week and next, grab them fast.