

Ravel Double Bill

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Ravel's only two operas, *L'heure espagnole* and *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, are perfect companion pieces but are all too seldom seen, either separately or together. The Royal Opera has performed the first in recent years, but twinned with *Gianni Schicchi*, and it's taken until now for Glyndebourne, who first did them in 1987, to re-establish the pairing in a new production by Laurent Pelly.

In the first opera, Stéphanie D'Oustrac, a great niece of Poulenc's no less, is a Concepción that positively aches with sexual frustration, shedding her knickers the instant her would-be lover Gonzalve appears. In a work that ticks and tocks from the first bar, it takes her some time to realize where she can best get her bread buttered. Mind you, Elliot Madore's strongly sung Ramiro, the muleteer with the muscles of Samson, is more grinning clown than beefcake, so her tardiness in catching on is understandable.

Alek Shrader's lank-haired Gonzalve avoids obvious campy and looks every bit the sleazy lothario, belied by an introverted sense of his own poetic genius, which just adds to Concepción's sexual agony while Paul Gay's seedy Don Inigo provides a limp alternative.

Pelly is always one to cash in on the potential for broad comedy and apart from Madore's mugging, there are plenty of opportunities for double takes and visual gags, including a giant phallic clock, excusable given the references to swinging pendulums and useless appendages that pepper Franc-Nohain's libretto. In keeping with the second half of the programme, a ballet of bric-a-brac is hinted at as clocks chime and the wall of inanimate objects comes to life but sad to say it's all too tentative and brief.

Despite the wonderful orchestrations, evocations of a sleepy, sexy Spanish afternoon and witty underlining of the fairly filthy scenario, *L'heure espagnole* is a slight piece that can only really serve as a curtain-raiser for something meatier. *L'enfant et les sortilèges* is the work of genius that it needs to set it off.

It tells of a naughty schoolboy (Khatouna Gadelia) who goes through a nightmare scenario as the household items and animals he's abused return to reprimand him. Pelly's production begins with a brilliant piece of imagery, which it would be unfair to reveal. He and his designer Barbara de Limburg go on to give us a series of stunning coups de theatre, from a dancing, sexualised teapot and Chinese cup and a dazzling fire, sung with flickering radiance by Kathleen Kim, to a hauntingly melancholy realization of torn wallpaper.

Apart from the tricky coloratura of the fire, there's little opportunity for virtuoso singing, solo turns coming and going with great speed, and another strength of the production is a rock solid ensemble. Kazushi Ono conducts with plenty of Gallic crispness and bounce, wallowing in the gorgeous waltz rhythms that constantly bring to mind Ravel's *La valse*, a work which, like the opera, is about much more than mere entertainment.

The two works bring together a wide range of styles and, given his association with George Gershwin, it's not surprising that musical theatre is among them. He's one of the few classical composers that Stephen Sondheim acknowledges as an influence and the American's more lyrical work echoes time and again in the sounds, the audaciousness of the stage imagery and the unusual choice of subject matter.

Glyndebourne's season began with the woodland life of Janacek's *The Cunning Little Vixen* and ends with similar scenes as frogs, squirrels and bugs fill the stage. Ravel's captivating double bill is a splendid end to the 2012 programme before several of this year's productions set off on the now familiar UK tour, which will see Michael Grandage's new *Figaro* at the BBC Proms next month.

Simon Thomas