



A LIFE IN OPERA

Henrietta Bredin surveys Jonathan Dove's journey from rehearsal pianist to star composer

The word 'opera' means work, both in the sense of the labour undertaken and the result produced. In its fuller meaning it is a performance in which drama is expressed through music, vocal and instrumental. The impulse to create drama through music, to tell a story, is deeply rooted in Jonathan Dove. An opera by him can range from the tiny to the vast, and anything in between; from *Pig*, a 10-minute opera in miniature for three singers, complete with overture, arias, duets and trios, to community operas in places as various as Hastings, Ashford, Peterborough, Berlin and Aix-en-Provence involving up to 600 participants. Dove is broad-minded and adventurous in his choice of subject matter and has an understanding of the human voice and its potential that makes his music instantly communicative and appealing to singers and listeners. What matters is how music and words come together to create a dramatic and communicative whole.

One composer who knew that in his bones was Benjamin Britten, perhaps Dove's most influential inspiration and a kindred spirit in that his pioneering compositions – community opera, chamber opera, church opera, television opera, opera for children – are all forms which Dove has also explored. Both men wrote operas for Glyndebourne, *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Albert Herring* for Britten, and *Flight* for Dove, with the librettist April De Angelis. That opera was first performed by Glyndebourne in 1998 and was seen at Opera Holland Park in 2015, the first opera to be performed here by a living composer. Astonishingly, it has received well over 30 different productions, in the UK, Europe, America and Australia, and in the website Bachtrack's statistical survey of 2022, despite tough competition from the big beasts of American opera, Philip Glass and John Adams, Dove was the living composer with the most-performed single opera in one year, *Flight* having been given 17 performances worldwide.

Dove has always been a man of the theatre. He is a pianist and has also played the organ, viola and accordion; he studied music and composition at Cambridge University and on leaving embarked on working as a rehearsal pianist, orchestrator and chorus master, so was plunged into the world of performance from the start, learning the business from the inside. He has said that he always felt an outsider, somehow not quite respectable, a bit naughty, in avoiding a prevailing modernist aesthetic, compared to the youthfully brilliant George Benjamin for example, at one time Oliver Messiaen's only private pupil; Mark-Anthony Turnage, jazz-

influenced and edgy protégé of Oliver Knussen and Hans Werner Henze; or Thomas Adès, who was still at Cambridge when he came up with the idea for *Powder Her Face*, his highly successful first opera.

Plunging into other composers' operas to create versions of them for smaller forces proved a brilliant exercise in understanding structure and how to convey scale, but in miniature. His version of Wagner's *Ring* cycle toured sports halls and leisure centres in the 1990s and was hailed as 'a pocket-sized miracle' and a 'masterpiece of re-creation'. What Dove knew was what he liked, and who he was hoping to reach with his work – anyone, no barriers – people who love theatre, people who love music, singing, people who don't only listen to 'contemporary' music but to every kind of music. He decided, as a guiding principle, to write himself a good night out.

Even Dove's string quartets have a narrative aspect – he has a strong urge to tell a story, and to tell that story as clearly and vividly as possible. He works hard to find exactly the right sound for each character, each event, each moment, and singers love performing his music. He knows how to compose music for voices that communicates directly, that is challenging and exciting to perform. Young singers regularly pick his arias and songs for auditions and competitions, and have considerable success with them – however much of a reach it may be for a youthful mezzo to sing her way through the act of giving birth, as does the Minskwoman in *Flight*, it's

not as specifically challenging (or muffled) as the notorious fellatio scene from *Powder Her Face*.

Writing music for plays – collaborating with the director Jonathan Kent on a string of exceptional productions for the Almeida Theatre starring the likes of Diana Rigg, Ralph Fiennes and Cate Blanchett – and adapting music for community projects have both proved invaluable to Dove. He has said that 'I've spent my life watching plays as well as going to concerts. I love to watch an actor's sense of timing, hoping to find equivalents of that in music.' And he credits the late and greatly missed director Graham Vick as a key influence, encouraging him to think about opera in relation to the widest possible audience, reaching people who might not think it was for them but who respond to big operatic gestures, to the power of choral singing, the vertiginous thrill of a singer hitting a high note. Something that Vick once said, as they were rehearsing in a chilly warehouse in Birmingham, has stuck with him: 'The operatic experience is just too important to be restricted to opera houses.' Opera is the dominant form in Dove's output – and he becomes an actor within his own creations, due to his habit, adopted early on, of singing through a new work, accompanying himself on the piano, taking and voicing every part, to a small audience of tried and trusted friends, the conductor and director who will be involved, the person who made the commission, sometimes a singer or two. The immediate response and subsequent feedback, along with his own experience of performing, are essential.

With a fine instinct for good writers and congenial collaborators, Dove's chief librettists over the years have been Alasdair Middleton and April De Angelis. Middleton ingeniously wove Romanian folk tales into the fantastical *The Enchanted Pig*, drew on the Finnish saga the *Kalevala* and its hero Lemminkäinen for *Swanhunter*, and on the nineteenth-century Italian writer Carlo Collodi for *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. De Angelis made her own contemporary fable in her text for *Greed*, one of a set of seven modern-day Deadly Sins, used the myth of Phaeton, who drove his father Helios's horses too close to the sun, to show the survivors of an unspecified global catastrophe in *The Day After*, and was inspired by the true-life experience of Mehran Karimi Nasseri, an Iranian refugee who took shelter in and lived at Paris's Charles de Gaulle Airport for 18 years, for the core story in her adroitly rhymed text for *Flight*.

Jane Austen's writing, her dazzlingly precise storytelling, has proved irresistible. After the delectably funny, episodic *The Beautifull Cassandra*, written when Austen was 13 years old and turned by Dove into a bravura entertainment for narrator and piano, he moved on to a chamber opera treatment of *Mansfield Park* – following once more in the footsteps of Britten, who had got some way into planning a *Mansfield Park* opera, also imagining Fanny Price as a mezzo, in his case Kathleen Ferrier. A number of Dove's operas have been translated and performed in other languages, particularly in the case of *The Monster in the Maze*, based on the myth of the Minotaur, which involves a large number of children and

which is always sung in the language of the country in which it's performed. So Dove, and the librettist Alasdair Middleton, have had the intriguing experience of hearing the work in English, German, French, Portuguese, Taiwanese, Cantonese, Swedish and Catalan.

Now Dove and Middleton have happily responded to a suggestion sparked by the holiday reading of Opera Holland Park's James Clutton, who had raced through the first volume in the *Itch* series of young adult novels by Simon Mayo and become convinced that its story of element hunting and international skulduggery foiled by the schoolboy hero Itchingham Lofté could make an opera. A commission followed swiftly. 'It's going to be for people of all ages,' says Dove, 'and I hope it will attract first-timers. It's about science, it's a thriller, it's an adventure story – and the love interest is, rather wonderfully, for nature, the world and scientific knowledge rather than another human being.' In addition to that, there was a Wagnerian attraction: 'The reason I smelt the possibility of an opera in the book was that it's like the *Ring* cycle in compressed form: a magical substance of extraordinary power comes from the depths, mankind doesn't deal with it well, it has to be returned to the depths.'

Please note, the Wagnerian connection does not extend to length. *Itch* is contained, clever, informative and packed with cliff-hangers and plot twists. It will, as Dove always hopes, be a very good night out. ●