

The return of 'Artaxerxes'



Cool Britannia Thomas Arne's 'Artaxerxes' is back at the ROH after 150 years

Eighteenth-century Britain loved him, but few today appreciate the full talent of composer Thomas Arne. Conductor Ian Page wants to change that – he tells **Jonathan Lennie** about reviving a forgotten opera

Thomas Arne's name is familiar to most for his Last Night of the Proms favourite 'Rule, Britannia!', which is a ditty lifted from the composer's masque 'Alfred'. But the fact that the rest of his oeuvre is so little known is surprising, as Arne was the best-loved British composer of his day for his many operas, cantatas, keyboard concertos, sonatas, songs and incidental music for theatre.

It is hard to imagine anyone more closely connected with Covent Garden – in 1710 he was born in the Crown and Cushion on King Street (check out the Blue Plaque), he lived in the area, his operas were performed at the Covent Garden Theatre (forerunner of the Royal Opera House) and he is buried in St Paul's Church, on the piazza.

His opera 'Artaxerxes', premiered in 1762, is but one of about 90 musical settings of the story, by the Italian playwright Metastasio, about a Persian prince whose best friend has been condemned for a murder committed by his father. Arne's English version was a huge success when it was unveiled at the Covent Garden Theatre, even

occasioning a riot at its first revival. It remained in the theatre's repertoire for 80 years. Unfortunately, the (unpublished) recitatives and finale were destroyed in a fire there in 1808 and the subsequent shortened version proved less enduring.

Ian Page, the tall, 45-year-old conductor, founded the Classical Opera Company 12 years ago. As the name suggests, it is a period-instrument ensemble specialising in the late eighteenth century. For this new production of 'Artaxerxes', he has written new recitatives and commissioned Duncan Druce (the composer and baroque violinist, who played on a recording of the work) to write a replacement finale. Page takes time out from rehearsals with his fantastic young cast to chat about the return of 'Artaxerxes' to the Royal Opera House after 150 years.

Is 'Artaxerxes' worth revising?

'Yes, it is a really fantastic piece. There are 29 numbers, including the finale, and most are just two minutes long. Arne was an absolutely top-drawer tunesmith... His is a very interesting sound-world – equidistant between Handel and Mozart.'

Why is Thomas Arne forgotten?

'He was mainly a theatre guy, so a lot of his music was written for dramatic presentations and masques, and it died with the theatrical productions.'

What caused the riot?

'The tenor John Beard, who sang the role of Artabanes, was also the manager of Covent Garden. There used to be a really good scheme, which was if there were any empty seats, you could get in free for the third act. Beard stopped this policy for "Artaxerxes" and there was a huge riot. They completely trashed the auditorium. There was £2,000 worth of damage – and that was in 1763!'

Is the Linbury Studio suitable for performing this sort of work?

'Not really. The acoustics are not great. To do these pieces justice, what we need is an eighteenth-century theatre. The problem with the Linbury is that because the orchestra is so big, we need a double pit, so capacity is under 400, which is a shame. It is a problem in this country: we have the top singers and players, but venue-wise... In Italy they have the most exquisite theatres, and, for an opera company, the instrument is the theatre. It's funny, in the whole authenticity-movement discussion, no one talks about theatres.'

Why did you form the Classical Opera Company?

'It seemed to me that when we started, there were a lot of people doing Handel pretty well, but it seemed bizarre that Mozart wrote 20-odd operas and less than a third of them are in the mainstream repertoire.'

Why do you like working with young singers?

'It suits the repertoire, which is such vibrant, vocally youthful music. Look at Mozart: he died when he was 35. It feels like young people's music.'

Will this stimulate interest in Arne?

'I'd be surprised if they don't do something at the Proms next year for his 300th anniversary.'

Ian Page conducts 'Artaxerxes', which runs at the Linbury Studio (Royal Opera House) until Nov 14.



www.timeout.com/classical