

How to write a piece by Mozart

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Director Melly Still (left) with designer Anna Fleische

A Mozart world premiere – now there's an impresario's dream. This is the audacious claim, or thereabouts, made by the Classical Opera Company ahead of a production that opens next week.

Ian Page, founder and artistic director of this ambitious young opera group, is known for his interest in musical fragments and archaeological finds: in 2004 the company presented a meticulously reconstructed version of Mozart's rarely heard *Mitridate, re di Ponto*, revived last year, and last October they brought Thomas Arne's forgotten treasure, *Artaxerxes*, to the Linbury Studio Theatre in Covent Garden. With their upcoming production of Mozart's *Zaide*, however, Page's company will be attempting one of their most radical and comprehensive projects yet.

In truth, *Zaide* has never languished long in obscurity – even if its reputation has come to rest on a single aria, the exquisite "Ruhe sanft" – and this is by no means the first attempt at a reconstruction. Mozart began the work on spec in the autumn of 1779 at the age of 23 but abandoned it after two acts, with an overture still missing, when the commission came in for *Domeneo* the following year and he turned his attention to that work. In 1866 a completed score was performed for the first time, and throughout the 20th century there were a range of notable interpretations, from Italo Calvino's fantastical vision to a highly politicised staging by American director Peter Sellars.

What distinguishes this project is its sheer scope and the number of collaborative artists it involves, including the poet Michael Symmons Roberts, dramaturg Ben Power and director Melly Still. Although Still made her notable opera debut with a production of Dvorák's *Rusalka* at Glyndebourne last year, her career has largely focused on straight theatre – it was with *Coram Boy* at the National Theatre in 2005 that she shot to prominence. Not only does this mean that (unlike many fiercely autonomous opera directors) she is used to a more democratic working style, but that she has also arrived with an open mind. In the past the score has often been supplemented with music from Mozart's *Thamos, King of Egypt* but Page has spent some years sourcing appropriate arias from within a two-year margin on either side of *Zaide*. "To me the score sounded complete, it didn't feel like a strange patchwork or collage, it just felt very pure and clean," Still says, "and I was drawn in by the themes, not just of forgiveness, but the complexity of forgiveness."

Zaide is often considered a precursor to Mozart's later *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*: both are written as singspiels, both are set in orientalisised seraglios and both explore similar themes of incarceration. While the latter is vaguely comic, however, the former is altogether darker. Based on an original narrative by Franz Josef Sebastiani, *Zaide* concerns the love affair between two slaves, Zaide and Gomatz, and their quest for freedom from the jealous tyrant Sultan Soliman.

Early on in rehearsal sessions Still encouraged her cast – an exciting line-up of young singers including Pumeza Matshikiza in the title role and Andrew Goodwin as Gomatz – to research their characters. "Actors do it very naturally, they're obsessed with working things through and singers don't do it at all. I think it's because song is often an expression of feeling, it's often alliterative, and it dwells more on a state of mind rather than on an action," she says. Working with Symmons Roberts' translation and extension of the original libretto, and Power's spoken dialogue, Still has eschewed Sebastiani's ending, in which Zaide and Gomatz are revealed as siblings, and followed the tone that Page has set.

The director has, however, decided to add depth to the narrative by weaving through an entirely new character called Perseda, played by soprano Amy Freston, who offers a parallel of sorts to Zaide herself. "I came across a play by [the 16th-century English dramatist] Thomas Kyd, called *Soliman and Persada*, which has very similar characters and situations to this, so it seemed an appropriate name to rob."

Unlike Sellars, who used the opera as a lens to examine 21st-century east-west relations, Still has chosen to dissolve this dichotomy. "For Mozart, the political spine of the piece was about incarceration, slavery, tyranny, rather than Christianity and Islam," she argues. "If we were to address that now it would be something greater and bigger than intended." At the time Sellars irritated musicologists by asserting Mozart as a political revolutionary, claiming that "every single aria [of his] is a radical gesture of equality between the ruling class and the working class." I ask Still whether she concurs.

"I've not come across him being so actively political but he was furious about oppression, and his sense of being oppressed, and I think he was fantastically inspired by the women in his life – here Zaide is the real inspiration of the drama."

Still will give little away about her chosen setting but she does drop hints about the interpretation. "In our situation they're all prisoners but the women are clean and well-fed and have privileges; they're sex slaves so it's in the men's interests to keep them looking nice."

She knows that the production will provoke mixed reactions – to some the very idea of tinkering with Mozart's score amounts to sacrilege – and as well as producing a seamless drama, the staging had to be appropriate for touring, but she has relished each of these hurdles. "We've had to be quite resourceful, we're on a minimal budget, but that's what's so good about opera – it's so consummate, it challenges you in different ways."

'Zaide' opens at Sadler's Wells, London on June 24 before touring to Bath, Sheffield and the Buxton Festival;
www.sadlerswells.com; www.theatreroyal.org.uk; www.sheffieldtheatres.co.uk; www.buxtonfestival.co.uk

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