OLD MEDIA, NEW SPIRIT?

Jonathan Richmond

This summer the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment plays for two of the six productions at Glyndebourne: 'Idomeneo' and 'Theodora'. What are the dramatic advantages of period instruments in opera, and what do the instruments reveal anew about these works? Jonathan Richmond canvases a wide spectrum of opinion.

Listen to Natalie Dessay's recording of Mozart's Heroines with Louis Langrée conducting the period instruments of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and you know something is different. It is not only Dessay's brilliant singing but the close-up orchestral playing, each instrumental voice evocative and clear, that casts a spell as it leads the Queen of Night through her diamond-tipped 'Der Hölle Rache'. Lean but dramatic string playing points to every detail; woodwinds project fantastic colours; horns emit primeval sounds, while timpani fire bullets which shock by the silence that follows as much as by their impact. Yet there is a warmth and a humanity to the sound that makes us feel the queen's emotions all the more intensely.

These sound-qualities and imaginative interpretation represent the best of today's world of opera on period instruments, a much more sophisticated and thoughtful workspace than was common in the 1970s and '80s when the 'original instruments' movement was obsessed with following exact markings on musical scores and banishing the rich modern orchestral sounds considered out of place.

Simon Rattle rehearsing the OAE for its first Glyndebourne engagement, 1989

Some critics reacted at the time by lambasting what they saw as a clinical approach to music-making, and often characterized resulting sounds as 'vinegary' or 'astringent'. Nicholas McGegan, who is comfortable conducting both modern and period orchestras, says the strict approach to observing every letter of the score was at odds with what actually happened at the time of composition, particularly in opera, in which musicians and singers, positioned in sight of each other, interacted with the spark of improvisation.

Le nozze di Figaro at Glyndebourne in 1989, the first production there with period instruments

associated with today's jazz concerts. He is relieved that the period-instrument movement (as it is now termed) is 'a lot less brown rice than it used to be'.

Idomeneo, an opera from the sound-world of the late 18th century, but which years for sensitive and colourful interpretation, is a prime candidate for the newly flexible approach to period performance. It was Glyndebourne that brought Mozart's neglected opera back to life with its 1951 production under Fritz Busch. This month Glyndebourne promises to cast further light on Idomeneo with a new production which will see the OAE led by two conductors who work with modern as well as period-instrument ensembles. Simon Rattle, who made his first appearance with the OAE conducting Idomeneo at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1986, the year the orchestra was founded, opens this season's production, and Louis Langrée conducts the last four performances.

The OAE exemplifies today's broad-minded approach. The orchestra set out to perform on period instruments while hosting and learning from the world's leading conductors of modern-instrument orchestras. Collaboration with Rattle led the OAE to Glyndebourne, where it has performed in parallel with the London Philharmonic Orchestra since 1989. The 'traditional' LPO has itself been challenged to innovate by the appearance of conductors with period experience for performances that bridge the two traditions. Meanwhile, Roger Norrington, who played such an important role in bringing early instruments to the forefront with his London Classical Players, is now anxious to apply what he has learned to modern instruments. The early instruments 'teach you things about how the music goes ... the tempo, the phrasing'. With that knowledge, he says, 'I just realize more and more with modern orchestras you can do the same thing'.

Period-instrument musicians do not always agree with Norrington. Christopher Krueger, the Baroque flautist and University of Massachusetts professor, recounts how the 19th century brought a more flowing singing style in which the meaning of the words became less important than the beauty of the sounds. Underlining this...
change, new orchestra pits removed musicians from the immediacy of the words and drama on stage, while smoother-sounding and more powerful instruments came into everyday use. As Marshall Marcus, violinist and chief executive of the OAE, says, 'a modern bow is very good at legato. You get a thick, constant sound'. This quality was valuable to composers such as Strauss and Wagner who were trying to pull out long phrases that never stop', and became so admired that today's music conservatories emphasize the virtue of shifting inaudibly from downbow to upbow to produce a seamless legato.

The sound-world of the 18th century was quite different, however, drawing from the Greek ideal of surpassing nature with art. 'We were told to imitate the voice to see if wood and metal and hair could be as beautiful as the natural instruments,' says Marcus. Eighteenth-century bows were less developed at the tip, with the result that sound tended to fade and rise, giving it a speech-like character. Gut strings also produce more immediate and cleanly-projected sounds, giving greater control of gestures and phrasing, and leading to a cleaner, more rhetorical output. 'The real key to the difference,' according to Marcus, 'is that on a gut string with a Classical bow with a narrow hair and using no vibrato, the pitch of the note is so much more tightly focused and the narrowness of that pitch is what in my mind allows the clarity of texture. And the clarity of the texture and the personality of the sound is what I prefer.'

This aesthetic is matched in other orchestral sections. Modern flutes have a key for every single chromatic note but on a Baroque flute anything outside D major requires cross-fingering (complex patterns of finger placements over holes), producing a different timbre for each note. Some notes come out strong, others are veiled, leading to effects 'more imitative of speech with its variety of vowels and consonants', according to Krueger. Anthony Robson of the OAE finds his Baroque oboe, which responds to less pressure and is unencumbered by the vibrating metal keys of modern instruments, 'easier and it reacts in altogether a lighter way ... allowing the player to sing more freely'.

The OAE horn-player Martin Lawrence says his narrower-bore instrument produces a more focused effect than the 'big round' sound of modern horns, and has more character 'with one note sounding more different from another'. With the hand control of the early horn, he could achieve 'a million degrees of variation'. Even Baroque timpani share the aesthetic, producing a more rapid-fire sound, one that lends itself to shaping and phrasing, according to the OAE timpanist János Keszegi.

Period instruments are not just more characterful; they also have a natural way of coming together. Gut string produces a sound that is 'more transparent, much less glassy', says Ivor Bolton, conductor of the OAE in last year's Iphigénie en Aulide at Glyndebourne, while Krueger adds that modern wind instruments have a much more 'edgy' sound. Gluck doubles his winds and strings on the same notes, and period instruments can do this without the conflict associated with more powerful modern instruments. Lawrence says he can play his horn 'full tilt', producing an exciting effect of pushing the limits without obliterating his colleagues.

While instrumental virtuosity was valued in the Romantic era of the 19th century, emotional coloration was more important in Baroque opera. To Gerald Finley, the Agamemnon in Iphigénie, 'the quality of the catgut gives that purity of tone, which reaches our ear almost unconsciously and gives emotional tension without drawing attention to itself'. He revels in the visceral effects of hearing serpents hissing in the strings, the raw beat of timpani sounding 'the pulse of war', and the 'plaintive' cry of the oboe, which 'immediately arrests your imagination'.

As a singer this sound-palette 'underpins the psychological pace; it's very much the foundation on which you base your vocal line'.

If modern instruments cannot speak with exactly the same voices, can they nonetheless learn the language of their predecessors? Period musicians such as Emmanuelle Haim believe they can communicate that language to modern-instrument performers, delivering the spirit if not the exact sounds of period instruments. Haim had the players live the words sung on stage when she prepared a modern orchestra for the 2001 tour of Glyndebourne's production of Handel's Rodelinda. When 'I will chop off his head' was sung, she had the musicians playing as if they were chopping with the axe—very abrupt notes, and as nasty as possible.

Louis Langrée is a leading exponent of the newly-emerging synthesis of two performance traditions which combines the penetrating clarity of period practice with the serene legatos modern orchestras such as the LPO produce so well. He observes that the period movement came in at the same time as nouvelle cuisine, but that you can also 'remove the fat' from modern ensembles, while preserving the good taste. Vibrato can be pruned back, and phrases shaped for maximum clarity and the blissful combination of orchestral voices. Langrée has no qualms about mixing and matching, and had the LPO play Baroque trumpets and timpani for Don Giovanni at Glyndebourne last year because he could not get the right effects from modern instruments. 'When they play, I want them to play full power because it's music of the inferno. If they play less [as would be necessary with modern instruments to avoid overwhelming quieter colleagues], the effect is totally wrong.' In lyrical arias such as 'Il mio tesoro' and 'Là ci darem', however, 'you don't have the same velvet effect with a period band, and he was happy to allow the LPO's strings to carry the audience away.'

Iphigénie en Aulide, the first of two operas Gluck composed on the Iphigenia legend, tells of the torches inflicted when the goddess Diana demands that Greek
king Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to obtain winds to propel his fleet on its mission of war. Gluck’s music is spare but powerful, surprising both in its vigour and in the effects produced with subtle tone painting, and shocking in the depths it can reach with a minimalism that is quite modern. Its impact at the 2002 Glyndebourne Festival was brought home by the razor-focused period-instrument sound of the OAE under Ivor Bolton. The instruments were essential in connecting us to the torments of a mind plagued by the terror of the command to kill a daughter. A tad of darkness in the strings told all as Agamemnon, in denial, opened the opera by declaring that his daughter would not be sacrificed. Anthony Robson’s wooden oboe created a sound that was pure and devastating in its emotional impact. A soft but revealing oboe touch, fading into darkness as rapidly as it appeared from the depths, pierced deep at the conception of the sacrifice. In the Act 2 finale, where Agamemnon offers his life in substitution for his daughter’s, the agony in Finley’s singing was rendered unbearable by the hallmark clarity of the OAE’s sublime playing. Strings, alternately so soft, sighing and suffering and so barbarously pointed—free of vibrato and projecting the clean and clear sounds that come from gut strings—underlined the tragedy in perhaps the most intense recitative of all opera. The opera concludes with an eerie scene of the Greeks setting off for war. The heart-arresting beat of János Keszel’s period bass drum, its high-velocity attack unlike that of any modern instrument, ensured the audience would leave the auditorium suitably disturbed.

Glyndebourne’s new Idomeneo connects with last season’s Iphigénie en Tauride musically and dramatically as well as thematically. Idomeneo, beginning with an intense overture which Langrée describes as ‘cinematographic’ because it fades out rather than ends, presents lengthy sections of drama made gripping by the absence of the breaks imposed by the Italian tradition of alternating arias with recitatives, and is punctuated with choral numbers of great power. In many ways Mozart looks back to Gluck and French practice with this format, but he presents it with a striking sense of dramatic modernity that he never recreated in his subsequent compositions. Instrumental colour is vivid throughout and essential to revealing the essence of the action taking place on stage.

For Langrée, Idomeneo, which ‘speaks about the essence of feelings and all the most extreme emotions’, is his ‘most beloved Mozart opera’. Idomeneo is ‘no place for half-measures’, he says. ‘All is extreme: the joy is extreme, the sadness is extreme... Extreme feelings require extreme sounds, extreme colours, extreme expressions’, but all must be done with ‘simplicity and intensity’ and without sentimentality. The music must reveal the inner-world of humanity. ‘The storms are not meteorological but expressions of the inner feelings of the characters.’ When Langrée uses the French term cru to refer to the music of Idomeneo, he does not mean ‘crude’, but is using the word in the sense of cruauté, an uncooked vegetable to be appreciated for its natural taste fresh from the ground. Norrington comes up with a similar metaphor when he raps against vibrato which ‘doesn’t add emotion; it puts a sauce on everything’.

Philip Langridge, returning to the role of Idomeneo at Glyndebourne this month, finds the sound of period instruments ‘extraordinary... The colours of the woodwinds, trumpets, timpani are very different... They make you listen anew.’ The period sounds ‘speak from the truth, from the centre of the drama’. Langridge says the singer must not over-enact during Idomeneo; period instruments, with their clarity and colour, help show the singer the way. ‘There is a purity to the sound which goes directly to the note and therefore to the heart... If you were Idomeneo saying, “It’s my fault and I’ve agreed to sacrifice my son,” you would say it so softly you would hardly be able to hear it’. He finds the clarity of period instruments can underline such tragedy with just the right penetrating softness.

Langridge points to a passage in the powerful ‘Tuor del mar’ aria, where the bassoon emerges from the strings, ‘And you really hear the bassoon when it’s early instruments.’ Orchestrated recitative plays an essential role in Idomeneo, and Langridge finds period instruments make an important difference there as well, ‘Somewhere, when the voice is narrating over this background of sound, colour, shape, I find it much clearer.’

Period sounds are revelatory throughout Idomeneo, as illustrated by John Eliot Gardiner’s recording with the English Baroque Soloists. In the overture the very immediate string playing, open wind sounds and gritty brass provide the essential drive to give an impression of waves and fate together threatening to overwhelm humanity. In Elektra’s madly jealous ‘Tutto nel cor vi sento’, winds shoot venom through intensely-focused strings (there is an amazingly telling flute, its cool woolly sound beguiling), creating drama because the sounds do not disappear into each other but remain stubbornly distinct. Throughout the opera, woodwinds serve to indicate Idomeneo’s growing torment, the impact of hearing each earthy sound individually adding an extra dimension to his terror.

The storm which yields Idomeneo’s admission of guilt as Act 2 comes to a close has a violent dissonance that might seem un-Mozartian to a listener unused to period-instrument sound. Following Gluck’s use of the same device in Iphigénie en Tauride, Mozart has a...
piercing piccolo rise out from the sound-palette, indicating the emergence of a great monster from the waves whipped up in the strings. Shortly afterwards, the chorus demands to know who is responsible. Three sadistic and indeed ugly wind chords force Idomeneo to answer. These sounds, of a rawness exclusive to the period instruments that produce them, are not pretty, not the sort of thing the early critics of period instruments liked at all. ‘A monster is unpretty,’ Langridge responds. ‘It’s not smooth, bel canto: it’s got colour.’ There is an ugliness appropriately associated with Idomeneo, Langridge says, ‘an ugliness that he makes the wrong decision’. Even Norrington, the reborn believer in retraining modern instruments to period practice, lights up at the mention of period brass. ‘Old horns have that wonderful revolting sound. Often it’s meant to be revolting. It’s not meant to be pretty.’

Langré balances his appreciation of the special sounds of period instruments with his belief that the experience of being ‘inspired by these extreme sounds’ can lead to powerful performances on modern instruments as well. In his Don Giovanni at Glyndebourne last season, Langré led the LPO in vivid, colourful, and free-flowing music-making. His tempos were brisk, a characteristic of period-performance practice, but well-managed and did not seem fast. The modern strings were crisp and clear, capturing the violence, the heartbeats and the humour of the opera; wind textures were delightful as well as penetrating, if coloured less distinctly than period instruments. Using raspy-sounding period trumpets and gunshot period timpani was a shrewd move, turning on the heat for the opera’s most demonic moments, and lending support to today’s acceptance of a variety of musical approaches to Mozart’s operas and Langré’s view that ‘Authenticity does not exist. What is more important is the spirit.’

**Newsdesk**

**Payne for Opera Europa**

Nicholas Payne has been appointed the first Director of Opera Europa, the leading support organization for opera companies in Europe that was founded in 2001. He will be responsible for the development of the organization, which currently comprises nearly 50 companies from 21 countries. Anthony Freud, the Chairman of Opera Europa and General Director of Welsh National Opera, said: ‘At this point in its evolution, Opera Europa needed to appoint a truly dynamic Director to provide executive leadership, to energize, implement and extend its ambitious strategic development plans. I believe that we have found exactly the right person in Nicholas Payne, with his immense experience, having worked for many years with four major British opera companies and with artists from across Europe and the world.’ Bernard Foccroulle, Vice-President and General Director of Le Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, welcomed the appointment too, saying that Payne would ‘certainly help Opera Europa to become one of the most vivid cultural networks in Europe’.

**Legge appointed to RAM**

Anthony Legge, the Head of Music at English National Opera, who earlier this year requested voluntary redundancy in protest at the management of the company, is to become Head of Opera at the Royal Academy of Music in London from September. He is to retain links with ENO, however, and has agreed to take on the part-time role of music advisor.