

Don't you dare knock Mozart

David McVicar's take on The Marriage of Figaro for the Royal Opera has been hotly awaited. But Jessica Duchen finds him in a foul mood backstage

Published: 31 January 2006

A hurricane blows into the Royal Opera House's offices. Its name is David McVicar. The hottest property in opera direction, newly nominated for two Olivier awards, the 39-year-old Glaswegian is in a filthy mood. Rehearsals for his new production of Mozart's Marriage of Figaro are going well, but he's just encountered a problem with the surtitling translations. "It will be so sorted," McVicar growls.

Sitting on the floor, he quickly banishes his fury, at least for the moment. He didn't choose to be an opera director, he says. "Opera chose me. I kicked and screamed and bit against it, but now I have to admit that this is what I'm best at. I've said that opera is a dead art, and I still believe that, because nobody is writing any decent ones now. But I don't care: we have 400 years of it and we only do 20 per cent of what there is. I'm utterly devoted to the art form."

The fury returns as he refers to a comment on Mozart by a world-famous British tenor. "Ian Bostridge - and I really want this quoted - goes on about how Mozart never wrote any interesting roles for the tenor voice," McVicar fumes. "To which my answer is: if you could sing any of those roles, maybe I would listen to your opinion! I was incandescent with rage. If he could sing Ferrando in *Così* and finds it unrewarding, I would listen to what he has to say, but since he can't... D'you know what I mean?"

McVicar's productions reach parts of operas that many others don't. Rich with authentic, human detail, they are about convincing storytelling, fidelity to the composer and responsibility to the audience. Not for him obscure modernist reinterpretations. Recent successes include a powerful *Rigoletto* for Covent Garden, an irresistible *La Bohème* for Glyndebourne, setting Puccini's classic in modern-day London, and, last summer, Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, also at Glyndebourne - four and a half hours of Baroque music, after which the first-night audience gave what McVicar describes as "the biggest standing ovation I've ever seen. I think I acted as a conduit to Handel: the audience could see with blinding clarity what an incredible, exciting, moving opera this is. I put the composer and audience together: we crossed 300 years, and they met in that moment. It was the proudest night of my life!"

What's his take on Figaro? "It's this: can we please pay attention to the story? We've all forgotten the story. I feel I'm taking a palette knife and scraping off a patina that thick of meaningless, crap tradition. That's all I'm ever interested in

doing, and that's why I'm so misunderstood in German-speaking countries - they'll say, 'Aber wo ist das Konzept?' [A trained actor, McVicar peppers the conversation with wicked impersonations.] And I say: there's no concept. Only truth."

He's no less hard-hitting about attitudes to opera in Britain. "I think we are in a kind of crisis," he says. "The British are chronically embarrassed by opera. Look, it's a difficult, expensive, complex art form; it requires some effort; and I don't think we should apologise for that. I'm Scottish and I feel nothing but shame at the way the Scottish Executive treated Scottish Opera. Do you want a civilised country or don't you? That company was allowed to go to the wall. It's a fact that when that happens, nobody is prepared to offer a hand to help, because it's supposedly 'elitist'. But can you imagine if Rupert Murdoch liked opera, if Tony Blair liked opera...?"

"I think we should do everything we can through educational resources to give audiences an avenue into understanding the art form. Audiences should be absolutely inclusive. But what I can't stand is the dumbing-down process: attitudes like, 'Ho ho, this is for you, Mrs Bloggs; you don't need to understand anything about it', or, 'You too can be an opera singer overnight', or suggesting that groups like Il Divo amount to anything resembling opera. It's so patronising.

"And I've heard people saying, 'Oh, it's all for toffs - it's all about Cambridge types.' Excuse me, am I a toff? Am I a Cambridge type? I didn't even go to university."

How would he like to see things change in the next 20 years? "I'd like to see more opera in Britain happening at a higher level. We have to get back to the ethos of nourishing the national companies, making them centres of excellence. We've got to lower ticket prices. And we have got to get more opera on to TV. I'm only doing what I do now because when I was a kid in the Seventies you'd stumble on opera as you were channel-hopping. Suddenly there's *La Bohème* with Ileana Cotrubas. I switched on by chance halfway through Act 1 and just sat there on the kitchen stool, transfixed. Ditto when I saw Ingmar Bergman's film of *The Magic Flute* by accident. That doesn't happen now. We're fortunate that this *Figaro* is considered important enough to be screened on BBC2 at prime time. My *Barber of Seville* wasn't, and *The Merry Widow* from Welsh National Opera went out at a time when most of us were recovering from a Christmas hangover. That's not good enough."

McVicar has plenty to look forward to in the year ahead, including the revival of *Giulio Cesare* at Glyndebourne starring the countertenor David Daniels ("I could drown in his voice!"), and preparations for his first Wagner, the Ring cycle for the Strasbourg Opera next year. For now, there's *Figaro*: its designs, by Tanya McCallin, are inspired by the paintings of Ingres and Delacroix; the conductor Antonio Pappano is on the podium; and the cast features, as *Figaro*, Erwin Schrott, whom McVicar describes as "the most amazing young bass-baritone to emerge since Bryn Terfel".

It should be a night to remember. As for his Oliver Award nominations, they are for Outstanding Achievement in Opera and Best New Opera Production, both for Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* at English National Opera. "I've never won

anything in my life," McVicar insists. "I'm not the sort of person who wins things." That remains to be seen.

'The Marriage of Figaro', Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London WC1
(020-7304 4000; www.royaloperahouse.org) today to 6 July