

Small wonder: Opera in Wexford

The annual festival of opera in the tiny town of Wexford is proving so popular that it is raising money for a state-of-the-art venue, reports Jessica Duchen

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The music world's most creative thinking often occurs in unlikely spots far from the madding crowd. And tucked away in the south of Ireland is a venue that remains one of the most unexpected of all. A small, picturesque port founded by the Vikings, Wexford is the setting for an annual festival of opera that, since its foundation in 1951, has focused entirely on the rarest of rare repertoire. A tall order, one might think; opera audiences are notoriously conservative - aren't they?

Each autumn, Wexford Festival Opera scuppers expectations afresh by putting on the kind of works that don't stand a chance of being heard amid the stream of Bohèmes, Butterflies and Brunnhildes that trundle through larger opera houses.

Last year, for instance, it staged Fauré's Pénélope, a subtle, infrequently performed gem; a little-known Donizetti opera, Maria di Rohan; and Susannah by the American composer Carlyle Floyd. Even regular opera-goers could be forgiven for never having heard of any of them. Probably no other festival could pull off a programme like that; but such is the strength of Wexford's niche that its devoted following will, it seems, try anything once.

The operas have always been staged, to rigorous artistic standards, in the 570-seat Theatre Royal. Inevitably, though, Wexford's growing popularity means growing audiences and commensurately growing cost. There has been some criticism of the festival's use of Eastern European orchestras in place of home-grown ones - a matter of cost-saving - but the most urgent matter has been that of upgrading the venue itself.

To this end, building work is shortly to begin on a brand-new opera house on the Theatre Royal's site on Wexford's high street. The state-of-the-art venue, designed by Keith Williams Architects, is due to open in October 2008 and will be able to accommodate audiences of 750, with a 200-seat studio offering a second stage. Wexford Festival Opera intends the theatre to become a vital new resource for cultural activities on both a local and national level.

"The bigger theatre won't compromise what the festival is all about, which is rare opera," says Paul Hennessy, chairman of Wexford Festival Opera. "But it will give us all kinds of capabilities that we didn't have before: rehearsal facilities on site, improved backstage facilities and front of house, the possibility to do education projects and much more." The festival will remain the flagship event, but there will be a high level of activity all year round, says Hennessy: "It's the first lyric theatre of its kind to be constructed in Ireland.

"The experience of making the opera house happen has been astonishing: it's shown that there is a real will for it in the local community, the arts community in Ireland and the opera community. It's an important national institution and it will provide a focus for events to gravitate to that simply hasn't existed before.

"At the same time, we're aiming to preserve the surprise and atmosphere of the Wexford experience: you walk down the narrow, residential high street and suddenly find yourself in an opera house where you enter a different world. But you never lose consciousness that on the other side of the wall is someone's living room."

Opera houses don't come cheap. Wexford's is costing €33m (£22.5m); the Irish government has made a commitment to provide €26m (£17.7m) and the Wexford Festival Foundation has so far raised €3.5m (£2.4m) - 50 per cent of the private funding needed. The festival president, Anthony O'Reilly, donated €1m (£680,000) last October, a figure matched by a donation from Independent News and Media. Now a special fundraising dinner is to be held on 6 June, at Reuters Global Headquarters, in London, to help make inroads into the final €3.5m (£2.4m), money that will also enable the festival to run in alternative venues for two years while construction is in progress.

A suitably musical evening is in store for the occasion, with performances by three rising young singers in whose development Wexford has played a vital role: the Colombian soprano Eglise Gutierrez, who drew rave reviews last year for her performance as Maria di Rohan; the Mexican tenor Dante Alcala, who has starred at Wexford in Granados's opera *Maria del Carmen*; and the Welsh soprano Laura Parfitt, a recent graduate of the Wexford Festival Opera's artists development programme, which was inaugurated in 2005 to help to train some of the most exciting new talent among Irish and international singers.

A shadow fell across Wexford last year when the festival's administrative director, Jerome Hynes, collapsed while addressing a gathering of his staff and performers and subsequently died, apparently of a heart attack; he was only 45. Much loved for his energy and enthusiasm, Hynes had joined Wexford in 1987 and was also the deputy chairman of the Irish Arts Council.

Speculation has been rife through the music business as to who might be appointed as his successor. "Losing Jerome was a terrible body blow," says Hennessy, "but we have aimed to make an appointment by the end of June and we're on schedule to do that." Will the person in question take everyone by surprise? "I don't think so. Our appointee will not be drawn from outside the world of the arts."

Meanwhile Wexford is gearing up for the 2006 festival, 25 October to 5 November, which will be held in the town's Dun Mhuire Theatre.

Joe Vanek, the noted Irish stage designer, will transform the venue for the occasion and the featured operas are Donizetti's *Don Gregorio*, a "Neapolitan farsa" from 1826, plus a foray into more recent music with *Transformations* by the American composer Conrad Susa. Based on a series of poems by the Pulitzer prize-winning poet Anne Sexton, after stories by the Brothers Grimm, it was premiered in 1973 and draws on musical styles ranging from Monteverdi to Miles Davis; it's believed that this will be its first staging outside America.

The 2007 festival promises even more surprises, taking place in spring instead of autumn, in the extraordinary setting of a temporary theatre designed by Joe Vanek at Johnstown Castle, a romantic Gothic Revival creation from 1840 set among lavish grounds.

And so Wexford seems well on course to build on its distinguished history without losing any of that vital charm. Assuming that its fundraising dinner achieves all it should, the future looks set for Ireland's most unlikely opera house to grow possibly into its most significant.