

There's something in the aria: Behind the scenes at Glyndebourne

Glyndebourne's opera festival opens this weekend with a rich display of talent on offer. Jessica Duchen has been watching the stars prepare

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Many years ago, the story goes, a couple in Glyndebourne's orchestra used to slope off in the long interval to the more remote of the two lakes in the grounds, where they'd have sex in the bushes. Then they'd go back and tell their colleagues all about it during the second half of Carmen. Perhaps it's no wonder that the second lake was later closed.

I spend half my summers at Glyndebourne – the original country-house opera festival, which opens this weekend. There are worse ways to spend long summer evenings than wandering through the gardens and sniffing the roses, while a distant echo of Puccini reaches your ears. I still have to pinch myself to make sure it's real.

To many, this exquisitely eccentric spot in East Sussex is still synonymous with Toffs' Paradise: damp picnics, pallid strawberries and too much Pimm's, with the opera's second half a welcome chance to sleep it all off. But under the musical direction of Vladimir Jurowski, the hottest property on any podium since Valery Gergiev, Glyndebourne has transcended its élitist image to reach the cutting edge of international opera. Don't even think about sleeping through the second half now, for this is the theatre that gave British audiences their first glimpses of today's great opera stars before they made the big-time – among them, Rolando Villazon, Nina Stemme and, most recently, Danielle de Niese. And it has spawned ground-breaking productions such as David McVicar's *Giulio Cesare* and Nikolaus Lehnhoff's phenomenal *Tristan und Isolde*, Glyndebourne's first venture into Wagner.

There's nothing toffish about life backstage, where Glyndebourne is a model of egalitarianism. For a start, everyone eats together. I headed down last week

midway through a day of rehearsals for Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin. First stop the restaurant, Nether Wallop, where everyone from the gardeners and minibus drivers to the proprietor Gus Christie and leading lady De Niese are tucking into a fabulous buffet for under a fiver. I lunched with my friends Julie Pastauraud, the French mezzo who's understudying the role of Olga, and Marie McLaughlin, who sings Madame Larina. Julie is still recovering from four hours rehearsing the dances in the unseasonal heat. During the performances, Nether Wallop transforms into the audience's carvery; the staff enjoy supper in the courtyard café where the Jurowski family queues along with the chorus and stagehands.

Glyndebourne is awash with larger-than-life characters. Walking round the red-brick backstage corridors – "round" is the word, as the place is circular – you'll meet nobody prouder of their lot than the volunteer ushers in their gold medallions, unless it's Vince the resident fireman, who once took great delight in extinguishing a picnicker's unauthorised barbecue. Or the polyglot Ingrid, who mans the stage door, translates Norwegian books (including *The Bookseller of Kabul*), and has been appointed MBE for services to skiing, having coached the British Olympic team.

On performance days, anyone not in evening dress has to retreat from the gardens when the audience arrives, but today everyone is outside, soaking up badly needed sunshine. Rumour has it that the young soloists in the Tchaikovsky are a dream team, containing several world-class voices, so I am pulled towards a suave hunk in a black T-shirt and dark glasses. "This is Eugene Onegin," he says. It could hardly be anyone else. Onegin introduces himself: "Ales Jenis". The Slovenian baritone oozes star quality, and that's before he even utters a note. The others are pointed out: a slender girl with a radiant smile is Maija Kovalevska, the new Tatiana; Maria ("Masha") Gortsevskaya is Olga; and apparently there's quite a buzz around the Italian tenor Massimo Giordano, who may just raise the roof as Lensky.

It's Jenis's first Glyndebourne; he expresses regret at not having a car to explore the countryside. Many of the team move to East Sussex for the summer, and take advantage of the South Downs Way, or enjoy the proximity of Brighton and its amenities. Some unfortunate souls miss the point completely: one new orchestral leader arrived only to stare in horror at the surrounding hills and opine that he hadn't come all this distance to play in the middle of a field of sheep.

I asked De Niese, who sings the eponymous heroine in the new production of Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* that opens the festival, and is the partner of Gus Christie, about her first impressions. En route to her initial audition, she said, she'd had a nightmare journey and arrived just 20 minutes before she was due to sing. "The receptionist said, 'Do you want to go the long way or the short way?'. I went for the short way, which I didn't know was over the lawns. It was wet, I was in high heels and holding my pants off the grass,

looking at the sheep and thinking, 'Where am I?'. But the gods must have been with me that day..."

One often feels like that at Glyndebourne. I've passed happy evenings working in the Green Room, the "quiet" space where the performers go to rest between their slots on stage. Once, during *La bohème*, the tenor who sang Rodolfo began some warm-up vocalising at the other end of the room. I'd been so impressed by the baritone Nathan Gunn, who was singing Marcello, that I'd barely noticed Rodolfo, other than acknowledging that his voice was quite something. A year later, Villazon – for it was he – was world-famous.

The rising stars aren't just the soloists. The Glyndebourne Chorus is regarded as one of the most desirable first jobs a would-be opera singer can land. The mezzo-soprano Christine Rice is among many who started out here: "It was a wonderful experience, and quite a landmark," she recalls. "I could hardly believe I was really being paid to do this!" Among other noteworthy chorus alumni are the brothers Andrew and Rodney Clarke, who drew much notice last summer when they played respectively Joe and Husky Miller in the Royal Festival Hall's *Carmen Jones*.

And if anything goes wrong, the St John's Ambulance team deal with every ailment, from a wasp sting to the occasional collapsing conductor. The health-and-safety rep for the LPO, had to scrape maestro Louis Langrée off the pit floor when he passed out during *Don Giovanni*; the cause was hypoglycaemia, the cure a bottle of Coca-Cola. Perhaps the biggest scare took place in the second half of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, three years after September 11, when two shots seemed to ring out through the theatre. The culprit was in fact a lady in a wheelchair whose tyres had burst in succession following a rather ample dinner.

There's much to look forward to in this year's festival. The sophisticated French director Laurent Pelly will be there for the first time – he was responsible for the production of *La Fille du régiment* that wowed Covent Garden last year – rehabilitating Humperdinck's masterpiece *Hänsel und Gretel* into more than a mere Christmas treat for kids. Later, there's the world premiere of Glyndebourne's first new work from a Central European composer – until now it has mostly commissioned Brits. *Love and Other Demons* has been written especially for Glyndebourne, but with a libretto based on the novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and a composer, Peter Eotvos from Hungary, who is among the most commissioned creators of new operas in Europe, it looks likely to enjoy a truly international remit.

Tickets are as rare as ever, but a few remain for three of the operas, and an email-alert service has been introduced to keep would-be opera-goers informed about returns for the others. As for interval entertainment, the second lake has been reopened. And they're doing *Carmen*.

The Glyndebourne Festival (01273 813 813; www.glyndebourne.com), 18 May to 31 August; for tickets for 'L'incoronazione di Poppea', 'Eugene Onegin' and 'Carmen', register for returns@glyndebourne.com, a free email service that will alert you if tickets become available. There is limited ticket availability for 'Love and Other Demons', 'Hänsel und Gretel' and 'Albert Herring'

Treats of the 2008 season

Danielle de Niese

De Niese shot to fame at Glyndebourne singing Cleopatra in Giulio Cesare. The youthful soprano's exotic beauty and virtuoso technique mark her out as being on her way to the very top. She performed at the Brit Awards last week and her special association with Glyndebourne extends to being the partner of proprietor Gus Christie. This year she opens the festival in a new production of Monteverdi's L'incoronazione di Poppea.

Maija Kovalevska

The young Latvian makes her Glyndebourne debut next week in Eugene Onegin. She's fast building a trail of super credentials in lyric soprano roles: she's sung Micaela in Carmen at the Met in New York and Mimi in La Bohème in Barcelona. With her pure voice and delicate appearance, she seems born to sing Tchaikovsky's Tatiana.

Adriana Kucerova

Slovakian mezzo-soprano Adriana Kucerova is familiar to Glyndebourne through its touring opera, with which she appeared in Donizetti's L'elisir d'amore last autumn. Reviewing her, The Independent's critic reported that "star quality twinkled through every provocation". She sings Gretel in the new production of Hänsel und Gretel.

Massimo Giordano

A classic Italian tenor with a rich tone and powerful upper register, Giordano makes his Glyndebourne debut as Lensky in Eugene Onegin. Up-and-coming among the romantic heroes, he's appeared as Rodolfo in La Bohème, Cavaradossi in Tosca and Alfredo in La Traviata. Recently, he made waves in Verdi's Requiem in London with the LPO and Vladimir Jurowski.