

Arts observations: From Calixto Bieito to the The Moomins' maker

Bad boy Bieito's back to tackle Beethoven

by Jessica Duchon

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You might expect Calixto Bieito to resemble a cross between Count Dracula and Quentin Tarantino. The Spanish director, often called "the bad boy of opera", has become notorious for extreme productions that often feature explicit sex and violence, their concepts including a cannibalistic, post-nuclear Parsifal and a present-day Don Giovanni that involved vicious scenes of rape, drug overdose and murder.

Audiences at his shows are no strangers to sights that have variously included toilet activities, nudity and a great deal of blood. Now, in a co-production with the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, Bieito is bringing his staging of Beethoven's *Fidelio* to ENO and traditionalists are quaking in their boots. Yet when he emerges from rehearsals in east London, clad in his trademark black, it turns out Bieito is a pussycat. He seems mystified by the degree of hostility that has been expressed against his work. One critic referred to his *Don Giovanni* as "the most reviled opera production in the recent history of British theatre"; others believe he is out to shock. He insists not. "I promise I have never tried to shock people in that way," he protests, quietly.

Bieito is soon to work with New York's Metropolitan Opera, in another co-production with ENO, but the details of what, when and how are closely guarded – possibly due to the likely degree of resulting fuss.

His *Fidelio* could prove chewy. In Beethoven's opera, the heroine Leonora's husband, Florestan, is a political prisoner; she disguises herself as a man named *Fidelio* to infiltrate the prison and rescue him. Bieito's staging, unlike his hyper-realistic *Carmen* and *Don Giovanni*, is complex and symbolic, set in a labyrinth. "All of the characters are lost in the labyrinth, imprisoned," he says. "Sometimes our minds are our prison. I find *Fidelio*'s story quite weak if it is approached realistically but, if you take the philosophical side more seriously, then you can say much more about human beings today: what freedom means for us, or love, or loyalty, or justice. That is very important to our democracy."

He adds: "There are people who'll say, 'I don't like Calixto Bieito. I don't like anything he does'. I don't know how to convince them. You cannot go to an exhibition thinking it is going to be crap, and you can't go into a restaurant thinking, 'Oh, the food will be terrible'. This I cannot change."

'Fidelio', English National Opera, London Coliseum, WC2 (www.eno.org) from Tuesday until 17 October