



Glyndebourne: Hot tickets that don't go for a song

Glyndebourne is the ultimate summer night out for opera fans – but it can come at a high price, says Jessica Duchon

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As summer approaches, prepare to put on the glad rags and raid the bank account. Glyndebourne, the most famous rural opera house in the UK, is ready to welcome ticket-holders to its sheep-surrounded home near Lewes, East Sussex, for its 2014 festival. Picnic in exquisitely landscaped grounds and enjoy a world-class performance: it's the ultimate summer night out – at quite a price.

This year Glyndebourne celebrates a triple whammy. It is the festival's 80th anniversary and the current theatre's 20th; and a new music director arrives, the 31-year-old British maestro Robin Ticciati, taking over from the Russian conductor Vladimir Jurowski. The festival opens with a new production by Richard Jones of Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, a sprawling, great-hearted social comedy unseen at Glyndebourne for several decades.

When its owner Sir John Christie opened Glyndebourne's doors for its first opera in 1934, the exclusive atmosphere could go unchallenged by populist mass media. But today – though the festival receives no public subsidy – Glyndebourne has to do more and more to show that it is reaching a wider demographic while representing value for money. Its top ticket price, £250, is comparable to the Royal Opera House's. The place may have gorgeous gardens, but it can never rest on its laurels.

Renewal is a constant issue and the current theatre was a major step forward in that process. By the 1980s, Glyndebourne's old house was antiquated and inadequate. Building the new one cost £34m, achieved with funds raised from private donors. When it was unveiled in 1994, the auditorium's sound quality was adored, but the red-brick exterior less so. Twenty years on, its pros and cons are clearer still.

David Pickard, Glyndebourne's general director since 2001, acknowledges that it lacks the old charm, "the sense that you were in a secret theatre in somebody's home". That was sacrificed to vastly improved comfort, acoustic and artistic potential. "I once came to hear *Der Rosenkavalier* in the old house and noticed the boxy sound of a big orchestra in a small space," he says. "But when Robin raises his baton on opening night we'll hear that music in a glorious acoustic."

A few design glitches, though, won't go away. Some seats have restricted views thanks to the theatre's horseshoe shape and even these can set you back by £95. A funny way to build a modern opera house? Pickard says that a sense of intimacy for the performers was paramount in the design: "When you stand on the stage you feel cocooned by the audience, which seems so close to you," he says. "The reverse logic is that if singers feel comfortable performing there, the audience is more engaged." He adds that the most restricted views are unsellable and are used as house seats.

Worse, the orchestra pit is too small and restricts the potential repertoire. "We almost couldn't do Britten's *Billy Budd*," says Pickard, "because we couldn't accommodate the nine drums it requires." A makeshift solution was found and the result was Michael Grandage's celebrated 2010 staging; but Pickard has not ruled out seeking ways to enlarge the space when the time is right.

As for the audience, it is more vital than ever to attract younger people. This year one performance of Handel's *Rinaldo* is designated for under-30s, with tickets £30 each. Pickard says it sold out within 24 hours. "We had to raise £100,000 to cover the cost," he adds, "but it's worth the effort." Cinema relays meanwhile have massively extended Glyndebourne's reach and all of last year's festival productions were streamed free on the internet. For 2014, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *La Traviata* and *Don Giovanni* will go to the big screen plus streaming.

But Glyndebourne's renewal is probably strongest in its nurturing of new talent, not least via its busy education department and touring during the rest of the year. A new festival production, Mozart's early opera *La Finta Giardiniera*, has been entrusted to the young British director Frederic Wake-Walker. "I've directed shows at Glyndebourne for the tour and I feel I've really learnt my trade here," Wake-Walker comments. "It's hard for young directors to be given a break in opera because the stakes are so high and opera houses are understandably reluctant about taking a risk. Glyndebourne's support for young artists is second to none."

Rising-star singers, too, often perform here before they are famous: luminaries like Renée Fleming, Rolando Villazón and Nina Stemme all enjoyed vital breakthroughs on this stage. Watch out this year for Ekaterina Scherbachenko, BBC Cardiff Singer of the World 2009, as Tatyana in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*; the Irish mezzo-soprano Tara Erraught as Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*; and the multiple-award-winning American tenor Michael Fabiano making his UK debut as Alfredo in *La Traviata*.

The harsh bottom line for an unsubsidised festival, though, is whether the market can take the ticket price; and apparently it can. Seats may be expensive, but *Der Rosenkavalier* and *La Traviata* are completely sold out, with the others filling fast. Glyndebourne may not be perfect, but it must be doing something right.

Glyndebourne Festival Opera (01273 813813) opens with 'Der Rosenkavalier' on 17 May