

## COMMUNICATIONS



### REPORT

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MARK TATLOW (Operahögskolan i Stockholm) writes:

The eighteenth-century theatre in the grounds of the royal palace at Drottningholm, just outside Stockholm, is unique in that its original machinery has survived intact. In fact very little has changed at Drottningholm since the days of Queen Lovisa Ulrika, who commissioned both the present theatre, built in 1766, and its predecessor, which burned down in 1762. Lovisa Ulrika, sister of Frederick the Great, was married to the Swedish King Adolf Fredrik; their son, Gustav III, often known as the Theatre King, took over the running of the theatre from his mother in 1777. His aim was to establish the art of opera in Stockholm, and he treated Drottningholm (as well as the other theatres at his disposal) as an experimental laboratory. After his death in 1792 at a masked ball, a story later immortalized by Verdi in *Un ballo in maschera*, the theatre gradually fell into disuse. It was rediscovered by Swedish theatre historian Agne Beijer in 1921.

Although actually filmed in a copy of the theatre, Ingmar Bergman's film of *Die Zauberflöte*, made for television in 1974, is still many opera lovers' first experience of Drottningholm. The reality is even more enchanting than Bergman's virtual reconstruction: an opera performance at Drottningholm brings the eighteenth century powerfully to life.

Not designed for use during the cold Swedish winters, the theatre is a perfect venue for a summer opera festival. The foundation responsible for the theatre and its festival, Stiftelsen Drottningholms Slottsteater, has recently presented two opera productions a year, with occasional additional guest performances. Since I took over as Artistic Director in 2007, the theatre has mounted a Monteverdi cycle (the first ever in Sweden), as well as operas by Handel (*Serse* and *Ariodante*), Haydn (*Il mondo della luna*) and Mozart (*La finta giardiniera* and *Don Giovanni*). Half of these have been co-productions with Operahögskolan i Stockholm (University College of Opera, Stockholm), under the aegis of the theatre's Young Artists' Programme. Senior students from the College are thus enabled to make their debuts at Drottningholm, where they gain an unrivalled experience of eighteenth-century musical and theatrical style. Guest performances have included Florian Gassmann's *L'opera seria*, in co-operation with a smaller Swedish festival in Fäviken, and Handel's *Orlando*, from the Handel Festival in Göttingen.

Until 2010 the foundation was also responsible for running the Sveriges Teatermuseum (Swedish Museum of Theatre History), but this responsibility has now been transferred to the Swedish National Collections of Music (Statens Musiksamlingar). This has led to a clarification of the foundation's aims and objectives and opened up a new set of possibilities for the future.

During the 1980s the theatre pioneered the performance of Mozart operas on authentic instruments. Arnold Östman's legendary interpretations created an international sensation, and Drottningholm has continued to welcome artists with a special interest in early opera ever since: these have included conductors Reinhard Goebel, Nicholas McGegan and Christophe Rousset, to name but a few.

Now that the early-music movement has come of age and has itself become a part of the musical establishment it challenged for so many years, what is the way ahead? For me the answer hinges on the various ways in which musical and dramatic interpretation may be said to have related to each other in the eighteenth century. An undue reliance on dramatic subtext often unties the music from the drama and allows it to go its own way without really influencing what is taking place on stage. A purely 'musical'



interpretation, on the other hand, can frequently seem irrelevant to the staging and begin to live its own life. How do we bind the music and the drama together as suggested by contemporary sources? How can this be achieved while still managing to communicate with a modern audience that does not have a background in eighteenth-century gestural codes? Happily, at Drottningholm we do not really have the option of changing the locus of the drama, so we cannot use sets and costumes to provide a bridge to today's world. Everything depends on how the singers are directed to portray their roles, on the importance they are encouraged to attach to the actual words of the libretto, and on their relationship to the audience.

This summer the Belgian stage director Sigrid T'Hooft, well known for her work on period staging, will be directing at Drottningholm for the first time, and directing her first Mozart opera, *Così fan tutte*. The theatre will once again become a fascinating laboratory for the exploration of theatrical expression. Certain basic principles apply whatever style of staging is used. For example, however exciting it may be to use the full depth of the stage, placing the action too far upstage destroys the perspective; and placing singers in profile creates difficulties of ensemble and audibility. Otherwise, it's a matter of rehearsal choices, and it will be exciting to witness the result.

Future plans at Drottningholm include developing the orchestra and establishing an institute for early-opera performance studies, in conjunction with Operahögskolan i Stockholm. The theatre orchestra, which brings together many of Sweden's leading practitioners of baroque and classical instruments, works together for up to two months a year. To find a way of increasing this to three months would considerably enhance the orchestra's profile. The aims of the institute will be to develop the intellectual, historical and musicological basis for eighteenth-century opera performances at Drottningholm; to assemble, organize and disseminate relevant material about eighteenth-century opera at Drottningholm, especially through an associated website; and to promote research into areas of relevance for Drottningholm's Slottsteater, such as the placing of players within the orchestra and recreating historical lighting styles without the use of candles. The institute will also be involved in a new two-year master's programme in early opera for singers, recently launched jointly by Operahögskolan and Drottningholm's Slottsteater, and plans to organize an international conference to celebrate the theatre's two hundred and fiftieth anniversary in 2016.

For further information see <[www.dtm.se/eng](http://www.dtm.se/eng)>.

