

JUSTIN BROWN

John Allison

Brown conducts the premiere of 'Figaro Gets a Divorce' at WNO next month



There could be few more convenient engagements for Justin Brown than next month's premiere of Elena Langer's new *Figaro Gets a Divorce*, part of Welsh National Opera's Beaumarchais-themed season. The British conductor will be able to commute to Cardiff and other performance venues in the southwest from the Malmesbury home that has been his family's base of late—a convenience that is also a complete novelty since it is over two decades since he last worked in a British opera house. Once *Figaro Gets a Divorce* opens, his commute to rehearsals will revert to the more familiar pattern of travel to Karlsruhe, where as Generalmusikdirektor he conducts the new production of *Tristan und Isolde* opening in March. But for a moment this spring Brown may feel that he never left—he'll even be working alongside David Pountney, a senior colleague from English National Opera days who now, as WNO's artistic director, has also written the libretto for the new opera and will stage it too. Observers of the operatic scene may also feel as if they have travelled back in time, for Brown has changed remarkably little and, though now 52, seems to have retained much of his youthfulness.

The young conductor who began at ENO didn't end up in Karlsruhe by treading the usual career path to German opera houses. Taking the job at the Badisches Staatstheater was a very conscious decision, made only after a major phase of his career had been devoted almost exclusively to orchestral work and spent mainly in Scandinavia and America. 'I suppose I always had that dream of working in Germany, and I do feel some affinity to German orchestral sound and tradition, but really I came here because of the Wagner tradition,' he says when we meet in Karlsruhe on the morning after a spellbinding *Parsifal* early last summer, a performance that showed how well he has honed the orchestra since taking up the post in 2008. 'There are lots of attractive things about the house, not least its willingness to experiment with repertoire. And we're very fortunate with the theatre. Even though it's not—let's face it—particularly beautiful to look at, the acoustic is terrific and I think the orchestra is first class. But the Wagner history is something else. I'm fascinated by Hermann Levi's connection here, and the fact that much later he conducted the premiere of *Parsifal*. It's crazy and wonderful to think that some of my other forebears here include Mottl, Krips and Keilberth. Someone timed my first night of *Parsifal* and then compared it to all the timings that have been written down, only to find it was closest of all to Levi's. Isn't that wonderful?'

But even if something is in the air in Karlsruhe, how to explain Brown's Wagner bug? 'It's something you either have or you don't. I'd worked on a couple of Wagner operas at Scottish Opera—the Richard Jones *Ring*, which got only halfway—and it was a fascination from my early 20s, which just grew and grew. I became a Beethoven and Wagner person, though I was happy to undertake excursions into all those other things that are incredibly important to me; but whereas in my orchestral life I was able to fulfil the Beethoven side of things, my Wagner cravings went unanswered.'

One of the first things Brown did after arriving in Karlsruhe in 2008 was to take on the house's old *Ring* cycle. Now his next new production after the *Tristan* will be *Das Rheingold* in June, staged by David Hermann and the first instalment of a *Ring* cycle that will feature four different directors. Talking even about only Wagner's output—never mind everything else in the repertoire here—it's clear that these operas require very different approaches. 'This is an orchestra that allows me to dig out what I want, they come with me. And the wonderful thing about the repertoire system is that they go with anything. Every performance can be different, depending on who's singing on stage.' Isn't that a little nerve-wracking for the conductor? 'No, and I think every conductor should start in opera, I really do, and for many reasons. Apart from anything else, it's good just to learn the difference between a melody and accompaniment, less obvious than it sounds. Then there's the whole thing of saving disasters, about being flexible enough in the moment to go with it. That's what can be great and exciting about opera, these are the magical moments where the light gets in, as Leonard Cohen says ... It can be really special. This orchestra is not set in its ways. There's no feeling of "this is how we play". Each work is approached differently, and when we did *Les Troyens*, what was spectacular was that this German orchestra played with wonderful French, Berliozian gutsiness. Their *Parsifal* has broadness and grandeur. When I leave, they'll play differently. I haven't made it into my orchestra, but when I conduct they are my orchestra.'

As GMD, Brown has been able to do all those 'music director pieces'—the Wagners, *Don Carlos*, *Boris Godunov*, *Der Rosenkavalier*—as well less expected works such as

■ Tobias Kratzer's 2014 Karlsruhe staging of 'Meistersinger', part of Justin Brown's Wagner thread





■ Home from home: the Badisches Staatstheater

Delius's *A Village Romeo and Juliet* and Krása's *Verlobung im Traum*. He doesn't rule out a return to Mozart one day, but for now feels little identification with pre-Beethoven repertoire or indeed the period movement. 'Doing Mozart at the beginning has left me with a lifelong feeling that one shouldn't give Mozart to a young conductor. I just knew I wasn't getting these pieces to speak as they should speak. On the piano I adored playing Bach, but I was never a Baroque guy. Perhaps the problem was that I grew up when the period movement

was at its most hair-shirted, and I wanted to like Furtwängler and Bruno Walter and all those people. Thank god we've moved on and it's no longer a lifestyle choice. The world isn't quite so segregated now, but I think it's true that you're either a Mozart person or a Beethoven person, and I'm 100 per cent a Beethoven person. The struggle within his music is intensely moving to me.'

The Karlsruhe position also allows Brown to devise interesting concerts. 'It's nice to be in a place where you're allowed to do programming. Last season, pretty much all the concertos we programmed were by living composers. We made the point that when it comes to new music, you can't just take your medicine at the beginning and then return to the standard works. I enjoy looking for new works that can on first hearing deliver something powerful and appealing, but then I also think that concerts should be like theatre—not in the sense of the conductor being a showman, but in a way that allows the whole aural experience to hang together in some kind of dramatic arch. We are lucky here to be able to explore wonderful cross-currents, especially with the Schauspiel, but also the ballet, and certainly we try to build bridges between our operas and concerts. When we did the Krása opera, we also did Viktor Ullmann with the orchestra, and our players performed chamber music by the Theresienstadt composers as well.'

Working closely with the theatre's Intendant, Peter Spuhler, Brown enjoys a lot of say in the choice of directors—and Spuhler, an especially open-minded boss with wide horizons, is happy to see several directors from the English-speaking world coming in. The *Parsifal* was Keith Warner's production, and the forthcoming *Tristan* will be the second staging in the house by Christopher Alden, following a gripping *Peter Grimes* in 2013. They bring something different to the house, as Brown notes. 'English directors—even the radical ones—are always more interested in the characters than their German counterparts, and the Germans are interested in the ideas and get hung up on *Konzept*. It's ironic that *Regietheater* is a German word adopted by everyone else, because it's not something the Germans practise much. For me, I enjoy both approaches. If something's well done and powerful, audiences will respond.'

In part, of course, Brown has been moulded by the experience of his first job at ENO in the mid 1980s. 'Mark Elder took me on as a répétiteur, and it was a wonderful time. I didn't know anything about opera then, except for having fallen in love with Wagner and Janáček. There was this excitingly raw quality of work at the Coliseum then. The first thing I played for was the David Alden chainsaw *Mazeppa*, a baptism of fire and a very interesting rehearsal period. Although it almost set some sort of house style, the singers—people like Malcolm Donnelly and Richard Van Allan—didn't know what had hit them, and it was also hard for Alden himself. Yet he came back and did that absolutely stunning *Boccanegra*. I became a huge Pountney fan then. One of the best things about that period at ENO was that he was absolutely not afraid to invite the best people he could find; he had enough confidence in his own work and position. We were seeing the most exciting things possible. So this WNO *Figaro Gets a Divorce* will be the first time we've worked together in god knows how many years, though David has come here to Karlsruhe from time to time and we've kept in touch.'

Born in London and brought up in Sussex, Brown went to Westminster School where he excelled as much in sport as in music. Yet despite the fact that there was amateur music in the family—his father was a church organist—he was forbidden to study music. 'But I still chose Cambridge because of the music. In those days I also played the violin, so I was in various orchestras and was a member of a string quartet for three years. I did everything I could musically and neglected my studies—it doesn't reflect well on the university that they gave me a degree at all! I did engineering, and in my final year studied acoustics and fluid dynamics, but it involved a lot of self-doubt. I had a sponsorship and a job lined up for me in



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■ Jonathan Miller's 1988 Scottish Opera production of 'Candide', preserved on CD under Brown's baton

engineering, but I plucked up the courage and defied my father when I realized that I wouldn't be happy without doing music.

'So I went straight from Cambridge to an audition at ENO. It helped that I could sight-read anything. It was the sort of place where David Freeman would say, are you free this afternoon because I want to persuade Lord Harewood to do *Sancta Susanna* and I just need someone to come along? Well, it was one of those Hindemiths, I think for the Adelaide Festival, which Harewood was running then. Idiot that I was, we went to Lord Harewood's house in Little Venice and I just sat there literally sight-reading my way through the piece.'

That was also the moment that Brown chose not to go and learn his trade in Germany, but to stay in the UK. From ENO he went to Scottish Opera, where among other things he conducted the premiere of Weir's *The Vanishing Bridegroom* in 1990 (taking it also to Covent Garden and making a television production). Was it through conducting and recording *Candide* at Scottish Opera that he met Leonard Bernstein, one of his great mentors? 'No, that happened earlier at ENO when I was assisting John Mauceri. Bernstein was in town and came to one of John's performances, and that's how it started. Bernstein loved young musicians and loved imparting what he had to impart. He was never happy unless he was teaching and you almost had the feeling that he couldn't study a score himself unless he had a young conductor looking over his shoulder. I went and assisted him many times, and was one of his students—paid for by him—at Tanglewood.'

It was in Bernstein that Brown made his official conducting debut, with the first British staging of *Mass* at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in summer 1986. Rodney Milnes wrote in these pages that 'The standard of coordination alone was

extremely impressive, for which great praise is due to the conductor, Justin Brown; John Mauceri was to have been in charge of this, the first of four sold-out performances, but so impressed was he by the standard of preparation that he generously yielded the baton to his young colleague, who repaid the compliment with clear, unflappable direction from a central podium. A remarkable achievement.'

In the early part of his career, Brown conducted opera in Santa Fe, Brussels, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Nantes, Lisbon, Strasbourg and Oslo. In 2010 he also made his Bayerische Staatsoper debut in Munich with *L'elisir d'amore*, but there had been an almost decade-long absence from the opera pit until he went to Karlsruhe eight years ago. 'It was a conscious decision, and in my 20s I realized that if I wanted to get to grips with the great orchestral work I'd need a break from opera.' Brown has conducted orchestras from San Diego to Tokyo and São Paulo to Sydney, but the most concentrated non-operatic part of his career has been the years (2005-2012) he spent as music director of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra, where he won several American awards for his programming, and also took the orchestra to its Carnegie Hall debut as part of Tom Morris's innovative and sadly short-lived Spring for Music festival. Another of Brown's calling-cards, something he still does several times a season, is conducting concertos from the keyboard.

'I do a lot of guest conducting now, especially in the Americas, and still keep my connection with Alabama. I do love Birmingham—AL, that is!—in the sense that when you love something, you don't have to explain why. There are those charming old-school Southerners—people think that there aren't any Democrats down there, but there are, many of them supporting the orchestra—and my wife Elaine and I have made many good friends there. There is also a very vibrant younger life—music from the

■ Karlsruhe rarities conducted by Brown: (l.) Krása's 'Verlobung im Traum', 2014; (r.) Delius's 'A Village Romeo and Juliet', 2012



other end of the spectrum has always been big in Birmingham—and I was pleasantly shocked by how “out there” my programming could be. Of course, there are also deep-seated problems which they haven’t dealt with.’

Most of the great conductors worked both symphonically and operatically—after all, how can one conduct Mahler symphonies without knowing what operas he was conducting at the same time?—and Brown wouldn’t now want one without the other, but having an orchestra and opera company simultaneously on two continents proved tough. ‘The people in America said I was leaving too soon, and it was very sad, but the juggling became a wrench each time I left one place for the other.’ Now he is signed to Karlsruhe until 2018, and beyond that he maintains an open mind as to whether his next music directorship will be on the podium or in the pit.

Meanwhile, there’s exciting work to do in Karlsruhe, including the premiere this coming December of Avner Dorman’s *Wahnfried*: yes, an Israeli composer tackling the anti-Semitism of Houston Stewart Chamberlain in a German house. ‘The worst anti-Semites at Bayreuth—Chamberlain, Cosima and Winifred—were of course all non-German, and the piece will look at how Wagner’s views were so contingent and pragmatic. Hermann Levi will also make an appearance, cementing the Karlsruhe connection to the piece. Dorman is a hugely talented guy who became my composer-in-residence in Alabama—his music certainly passes that test of immediate appeal—and I floated the idea of him for an opera here in Karlsruhe before we had the subject matter. The librettist will be Lutz Hübner, a terrific playwright for whom this will be his third opera—his second was *Wallenberg* for Erkki-Sven Tüür, which we did here a few years ago but was first heard in Dortmund in 2001.’

In addition to *Wallenberg* and *Wahnfried*, Karlsruhe has also performed Weinberg’s *Passenger* and Adams’s *Doctor Atomic*. The house’s political engagement owes much to Peter Spuhler’s direction. ‘In terms of new operas here, yes they are political. This town has had the whole Pegida problem that started in Dresden, with racist marches against immigration, so the theatre has become very vocal in opposing it and opened its doors for discussions—we’ve been willingly sucked in. It’s a political place, and this is something I find interesting about Germany, where theatre is still alive in a political sense. That feels a little different from England. I don’t believe there’s anywhere else on the planet that so puts its money where its mouth is when it comes to the arts.’

Newsdesk

Glyndebourne’s new General Director

Glyndebourne has appointed Sebastian F. Schwarz as its next General Director, and said that he will take up the position this coming May. The news came just when the rumour mill had gone quiet, and Schwarz had not been on the list of names under speculation, but his appointment has been widely welcomed by industry insiders as a breath of fresh air for the Sussex house.

Schwarz, 41, has been Deputy Artistic Director of Vienna’s Theater an der Wien for the last eight years, and before that worked for both the Wexford Festival and Staatsoper Hamburg. Born in Germany, he studied vocal performance and musicology in Berlin and vocal performance and theatre management in Venice. He is also Artistic Director and co-founder of the Pietro Antonio Cesti International Voice Competition for

Baroque Opera in Innsbruck, and CEO and Artistic Director of Vienna’s Kammeroper, which was incorporated into the Theater an der Wien in 2012. At Glyndebourne, he succeeds David Pickard, who left to become Director of the BBC Proms.

Gus Christie, Glyndebourne’s Executive Chairman, said: ‘Sebastian’s pedigree and background will bring a fresh perspective and I am confident that he will build on our rich and varied operatic history.’ Robin Ticciati, the Music Director of Glyndebourne, said he was ‘extremely excited about what Sebastian Schwarz will bring, especially his own personal artistic vision and his inspiring approach to what he believes opera can be in the 21st century.’

ENO buys time

Removed from Arts Council England’s national portfolio last February and placed ‘under special monitoring arrangements’, English National Opera has been told it has not yet qualified to be invited back during the current funding period but that it will still receive public funding of £12.38m in 2017-18. Speaking of ENO—and Colchester’s Firstsite gallery of contemporary art, placed on probation at the same time—ACE’s Chief Executive Darren Henley said: ‘Both organizations are making good progress in addressing their respective challenges, but there is more to do if both ENO and Firstsite are to become resilient enough to thrive artistically and economically in future.’

Theatres respond to Paris attacks

Opera performances—and the arts in general—were disrupted in the wake of the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris, with many theatres cancelling performances. Several opera houses also warned patrons to expect security controls at performances and advised audiences to arrive at least 30 minutes before curtain up. In the week following the attacks, the French Culture Minister,



■ Sebastian Schwarz, Glyndebourne’s next General Director

Fleur Pellerin, announced the provision of €4m in funding to venues and organizations to help cover losses.

Opera houses around the world responded quickly in solidarity with Paris. One of the first to make an announcement on November 14 was Theater Magdeburg, which cancelled that evening’s opening of its new production of *La Vie parisienne* and performed Rossini’s *Stabat Mater* in its place. The Metropolitan Opera’s matinee that day, *Tosca* conducted by Plácido Domingo, was preceded with the Met staff on stage singing ‘La Marseillaise’, and the anthem was also sung that evening before the start of English National Opera’s *La Bohème*.

A week later, during the security lockdown in Brussels, the Monnaie was forced to cancel a performance of *Medéa*.

Garnier at risk from within

Before the November 13 attacks shook Paris, the city’s theatre community was embroiled in arguments over plans to remove partitions between the boxes in