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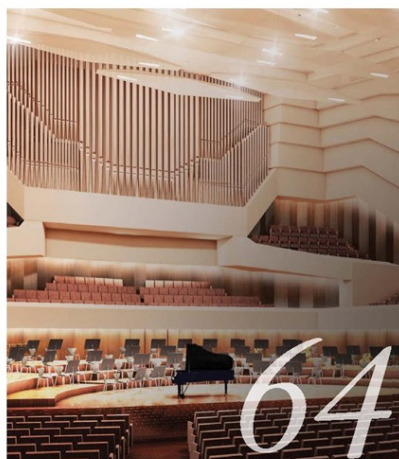
New Violetta in town

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GUTO PUW – Y TŴR

Guto Puw has always imagined himself as an opera composer. 'It was a bit naive, because it's such a difficult medium to grasp and so many composers have fallen at the first hurdle. I didn't want to just rush into it,' he says. He applied the same measured approach to the composition process: 'Creating something watertight that would work well in the theatre space has been quite a long process, but extremely engaging and fulfilling – it's been quite an eye-opener.'

The existence of *Y Tŵr* can be traced back to a Creative Wales grant from the Arts Council of Wales, which allowed Puw to concentrate on developing his theatrical writing. After researching and reflecting on operatic works from Monteverdi to Héctor Parra, Puw began to write the first notes. After the first act of the opera was workshopped by Music Theatre Wales, the company's artistic director Michael McCarthy approached the composer and commissioned the other two acts.

Music Theatre Wales later workshopped the second and third

acts of the opera too, something Puw describes as 'invaluable'. 'I was able to re-evaluate what I was doing then go back and change things; it also showed me what was working and was effective,' he says. As Puw worked, the project expanded in scope: the completed work is 110 minutes in length, rather than the predicted 80.

Based on Gwenlyn Parry's play of the same name, the opera follows a man and a woman from adolescence through to old age. The tower is a metaphor for their relationship, with each level representing a particular moment in their lives. Puw ascribes the play's broad appeal to its ability to illuminate human experience. 'It's such a powerful story and idea, but one all the audience members can relate to, because they're all on one of those levels.'

As the characters get older, the pace of the music gradually slows. 'Right at the beginning, the music is very fast and flowery, with lots of colours and rhythmic drive, but it slows throughout the second and third acts,' Puw says. 'It was quite

a challenge in a way to make that difference between the acts, because I have the same musical material.' One of the key landmarks is a lullaby; first heard when the female character sings to her baby, it is later heard when she wishes to move on to the next stage of her life and then when her partner dies.'

Although Welsh-language operas might be thin on the ground, the composer says that he found writing in the language to be perfectly natural: 'I've been setting Welsh texts to music all my life, so there was nothing different to it.'

► 19 MAY

Guto Puw *Y Tŵr* (Gwion Thomas, baritone, Caryl Hughes, soprano, Music Theatre Wales, Richard Baker, conductor, Sherman Theatre, Cardiff, 7.30pm; also 20 May, 7.30pm; 23 May, Aberystwyth; 25 May, Bangor; 5 June, Mold; 15 June, Swansea; 17 July, Buxton Festival)



▲ Goal achieved: Guto Puw

GEOFFREY GORDON – FATHOMS



▲ Taking up the gauntlet: Geoffrey Gordon


'How much time do you have?' Ask Geoffrey Gordon what attracted him to *The Tempest* and the composer is unsure where to begin. 'It's so astonishing. It's such an originally textured play with so many magical, fascinating moments. It's one of those plays you can vanish into, and I was almost sorry when I finished. Usually the double bar is a triumphant moment, but it was almost bittersweet to let go of living inside that play.'

The Tempest has inspired countless musical works, many of them expansive

and for large ensembles, so a response using just two instruments might be considered unusual. 'I think in terms of the instrumentation it's small, but in my head it's a massive piece,' says Gordon. 'I didn't feel limited in terms of colouristic expression or gesture; I found worlds inside those two instruments. I was very comfortable with the instrumentation and I really felt satisfied working with that palette.'

The movements are broad in scope, and range from a love duet ('Ferdinand and Miranda') to a 'magical scherzo' ('Ariel and all his quality'), but also take inspiration from particular quotes ('The Isle is Full of Noises') and dramatic moments ('Prospero drowns his book'). 'The piece isn't intended to be a blow-by-blow presentation of the play – rather, it tries to capture some of the really magical moments in the piece,' Gordon explains. 'I really looked at where there was the most

friction and traction and thought about how I could walk through this masterpiece and capture the essence and magic of the play and convey the big moments without a line-by-line reading.'

The complexity of the play proved inspirational rather than daunting. 'You feel an enormous gauntlet is thrown down when you add the word Shakespeare to the work and you're taking on the challenge of evoking these characters and the stuff in the play, but that's the magic of it and that's what makes it fun.' Sufficiently fun, it seems, that Gordon wants to take on another Shakespeare play: he is writing a companion piece, a violin sonata inspired by *Titus Andronicus*. 'As challenging as this was, I want to try again!' 

► 8 MAY

Geoffrey Gordon *Fathoms: Five Impressions of Shakespeare's The Tempest (with Prelude) for cello and piano* UK prem (Toke Moldrup, cello, Steven Beck, piano, St John's Smith Square, London, 7.30pm)