

## **Opera: Dead and buried, or alive and kicking?**

**Opera: Passion, Power and Politics at the Victoria and Albert Museum, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017 to 25<sup>th</sup> February 2018**

Personally I love opera. This is not to say that I love every opera, nor that I have loved every production I've seen. But as an art-form, it's true - I love opera. I was really keen then to visit *Opera: Passion, Power and Politics* put on by the V&A in partnership with the Royal Opera House and the first show in the gallery space below the new Exhibition Road entrance. It seems to me that unlike say drama which appeals mainly to the brain, opera offers a more complete experience. It deals with life's big themes – love, death, passion, betrayal. Opera plots are big stories that have big consequences. Opera appeals to the eye too, with costumes, scenery and the chorus often combining into a breath-taking visual spectacle. What's more, opera houses are grand; going to the opera is a social occasion. And of course, there's the music. Opera harnesses the unique quality of the human voice to bypass the brain and appeal directly to the heart in a way that is emotionally compelling and authentic.

But opera has a bad press these days. Operas are difficult – they're sung in foreign languages. And they're long and boring – five hours of Wagner? And in our current times, perhaps the most damning indictment is that opera is irrelevant and elitist, something only old, rich people enjoy. Opera is and has always been much more than this of course but there is a grain of truth in all these assumptions. So the challenge to opera, and to the organisers of this show, is how to reduce the barriers to enjoying opera, to counter the preconceptions that it is disconnected and senescent, and to get the young and the uninitiated interested.

Enter stage left Frazer, my 16 year old nephew, my companion for the afternoon and my sample of the young and the (almost) uninitiated – he has seen one opera. How would the exhibition appeal to him, the opera novice, and to me, the opera aficionado?



*Frazer Kirkland*

In fact, the visit started undeniably well for him. On arrival, you are given headphones. Teen tech heaven! And not just any old headphones but top of the range Bowers & Wilkins headphones that work with near field technology to play music from each of the featured operas as you make your way round the exhibition. With that, he was gone, immersed in the experience, and I barely saw him again until the end.

It started well for me too. As you enter the exhibition space, the first music you hear is the closing duet from Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. This is glorious singing, pure aural sex. The voices of Nero and Poppea twine around each other in a liquid sensuous embrace, given an added frisson from the knowledge that these are two of opera's most immoral characters who have just schemed and killed their way to power.

With this sublime music in your ears, you quickly find yourself in the first room of the show devoted to Venice in 1642, the year when Monteverdi's masterpiece is thought to have been premiered. The rest of the show then continues this organizing principle by focusing on a significant performance of an opera in a specific city and year: London in 1711 for Handel's *Rinaldo*; Vienna in 1786 for Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*; Milan in 1842 for Verdi's *Nabucco*; Paris in 1861 for Wagner's *Tannhauser* (the only opera not to have been premiered in that city and year); Dresden in 1905 for Strauss's *Salome*; and finally, Leningrad in 1934 for Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*.

Each room presents its opera at multiple levels of detail and through multiple media. On the walls are large yellow plates giving the fundamentals of the opera – date and place of performance, librettist, list of characters, and so on - as well as slogans, quotes, and bullet points to complete the introduction. These notes are never dumbed down though; rather, they serve to set the opera clearly in its social and political context.

This context is then further explored through the exhibits in each room including paintings; costumes; stage and theatre props; posters; scores and musical instruments; and videos of performances. These are all vividly and theatrically displayed in keeping with their subject matter. Some pieces are unmistakably beautiful, while most are interesting and informative. The working model of a Baroque opera set complete with rope pulleys and state-of-the-art stage effects from the time of Handel's *Rinaldo* is a particular highlight, as is the quietly contemplative display of photographs of the interiors of 150 Italian opera houses by Matthias Schaller.



'Fratelli d'Italia', Matthias Schaller, 2005 – 2016. © Matthias Schaller

Personally, it was also a thrill to see Joseph Lange's unfinished portrait of Mozart loaned by the Mozart Museum at Salzburg, which was on the cover of one of the first vinyl LP's I ever bought. I suspect for the nephew the piece that most caught his eye was the life-sized model of a Venetian courtesan in a provocative red leotard and skirt, displayed together with her 15-inch-high platform shoes. Ostensibly to keep her above the Venetian mud, these shoes were so elevated that the wearer needed to lean on a companion's shoulder in order to walk!



*Venice 1642, Opera: Passion, Power and Politics.* © Victoria and Albert Museum London

For the more musically inclined, the show includes an extraordinary range of original scores. Cavalli's transcript of *Poppea* is here, as is Handel's original score for *Rinaldo* showing the composer's alterations and crossings-out; Cherubino's aria *Non so più cosa son* in Mozart's own hand; Verdi's meticulous manuscript of *Nabucco*; and Strauss's working copy of *Salome*. To bring these unique and delicate documents together is indeed a coup for the organisers.

In keeping with the show's title, each room also attempts to position its opera at the cutting edge of political change. In allowing *Poppea* to be performed for instance, liberal Venice was thumbing its nose at conservative Rome; by satirizing aristocratic privilege in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Mozart was promoting Enlightenment values; Verdi was arguing for Italian unification and independence in *Nabucco*; while the tyranny and censorship of Stalinist Russia is highlighted by the suppression of Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*.

As with politics, so too with sexual morality. All the operas deal with desire; indeed, some are positively erotic. The show for instance cleverly features videos simultaneously playing eight different stagings of the Venusburg Ballet from Wagner's *Tannhauser*, music so charged that composing it gave Wagner 'rushes of blood to the brain'. Even more explicit is the video of the final act of *Salome* in David

McVicar's 2008 ROH production in which a blood-soaked Salome writhes around the stage making love to the head of John the Baptist. For me, the show's highlight was this *Salome* room. I've seen the video of this production before and while the music is not among my favourites, this is an astonishing staging, still powerful enough to make me pause for the clip's full length. If anything can dispel the myth that opera is safe and cosy, it is this!



*Nadja Michael as Salome, photograph by Robbie Jack/Corbis via Getty Images, 2008, Royal Opera House, London. © Robbie Jack – Corbis/Corbis Entertainment/Getty Images*

For the nephew, the show's highlight was the next room devoted to Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. Visually and aurally, this was indeed the most arresting room of the exhibition. The flashing red lights and the taped-off reproduction of the composer's study effectively signal the repressive conditions under which Shostakovich worked, while well-chosen exhibits such as Stalinist era posters, photographs of the original production and sketches of the costumes, built out the historical context. Together with music that is alternately strident, subversive and sexually provocative, the room brought this opera vividly to life. 'Intense' the nephew called it.



*Lady Macbeth of Mtensk, Opera: Passion, Power and Politics.* © Victoria and Albert Museum London

There is then much to admire in the show but eventually I made my way outside to meet the nephew - still wearing his headphones! - and we headed off so I could hear what he thought. But a rather reluctant 7 out of 10 was his verdict. I might have gone for a more generous 8 out of 10 but it turned out that we shared many of the same reservations.

Immediately following our highlights of *Salome* and *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk* for instance was the show's lowlight for us both. This final part of the exhibition is meant to celebrate the 'explosion' of opera in the post-war period and projected up onto a series of wooden panels are scenes from among others, Poulenc's *Dialogue des Carmelites*, Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* and Benjamin's *Written on Skin*. Unfortunately, this is an assault on the senses and after the careful consideration evident in the rest of the show, was a distinct anti-climax. Neither of us lingered much here. 'A missed opportunity' said the nephew and I'd have to agree. Frazer's interest strengthened markedly as the show came more up to date and to cater for the opera novice, it may have been better to have featured one further near-contemporary work in place of this disappointing compilation.



*Ensemble in 'Spaceship' at the dress rehearsal of Einstein on the Beach, Philip Glass in collaboration with Robert Wilson, 2013, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles. © Lawrence K. Ho/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images*

A further reservation concerned the choice of exhibits. Some pieces seemed simply to be filling space; often interesting and occasionally beautiful to look at but not relevant to the opera in focus. 'Random' was the nephew's judgement on the glass, silverware and maps from the Venice of Monteverdi's *Poppea*, while the Vienna of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* was 'cluttered', again spot on from my point of view.

Personally, I was also intrigued by the choice of the operas. It would be easy to quibble with this list of works, especially if your best-loved opera is not featured. No *Tosca* or *Carmen* for instance, not personal favourites but works that often provide a way into opera for many people. More generally in terms of genres, no French operas are featured. Neither are there any works premiered outside Europe.

Our final reservation concerns the themes of the show. The strong focus on the seven individual operas offers little in the way of thematic continuity. Indeed, passion, power and politics promised in the show's title are such abstract concepts that you have to make a conscious effort, preferably informed by a good deal of background knowledge, to find the connections between the operas. It would be fair to say that the nephew made next to nothing of the thematic side of the show. A stronger introduction to the show would have helped significantly both to justify the choice of operas for the opera aficionado and to highlight the thematic connections between them for the opera novice.

So if my sample of one opera tyro is anything to go by, the show works outstandingly well as an introduction to seven individual operas, especially in introducing the range of music in opera, For Frazer,

I suspect the headphones played a part in this too! But the show works less well for the novice to position opera historically at the leading edge of political and social change, or to give opera contemporary relevance. For the aficionado, this show is an enjoyable reminder of why we love opera and I would certainly recommend going for that reason. I'm just not sure though you will find it adds much that is new. And for both novice and aficionado, it is of course no substitute for experiencing the real thing!

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