Unlike Anywhere Else
Gil French

My enduring mental picture from four days (July 9-12) at the Glyndebourne Opera Festival in the south of England is a moving image, like a scene from a Merchant-Ivory film. Emerging from the aesthetically beautiful and acoustically perfect hall (opened 25 years ago), one faces an elegant, very broad, well-stocked bar area, an outdoor lobby covered by an open balcony above. The area is open-air on either end, leading to paths through blooming gardens (one so rich it has the humid feel of a tropical jungle) that lead to Glyndebourne estate’s 12 acres of expansive lawns with yet more English gardens, large shade trees, and ponds, where some people enjoy three-course meals and bottles of wine and bubbly at portable chairs and tables with white table cloths while others recline on large blankets enjoying the contents of their large baskets brought from home (food in one, drinks in another, a third with plates and cutlery). Yet others enjoy the packaged food and booze they brought at a supermarket on the way. Sheep graze in the pastures beyond the fences.

During World War I John Christie inherited the original Elizabethan mansion, then in shabby condition. He wrote, “You can hear the guns, especially in the evening.” In the 1920s he founded the five gardens. In 1934 the first opera was performed in the Organ Room. There is an outdoor plaque from the Association of Jewish Refugees honoring Rudolf Bing, who, before he became general manager of the Met, held that position at Glyndebourne from 1936 to 1949. During World War II there were no operas; hundreds of refugee children were cared for at Glyndebourne.

Now the grounds open to the public at 3 PM (Sundays at 2), allowing people to make a day of it even before the opera starts at 5:00 (Sundays an hour earlier). The major intermission (or interval, as the British call it) is 90 minutes long, allowing for a relaxing, un rushed supper. If you have ordered one, your elegant baskets are waiting at your reserved table. People who’ve brought their own either have laid their blankets and baskets on the lawn ahead of time (no one worries about anything being filched) or retrieve them from their cars during the break.

For those with cars, lingering after the opera is popular as well; people with blankets simply leave them on the lawn, and those with reserved tables leave a supplied plastic notice card on the table after supper. With southern England being 10 degrees further north (about on par with Berlin) than New York, in July mornings begin an hour earlier and evenings end an hour later. Dusk doesn’t end until after 10 PM. The operas I attended ended between 9 and 9:30, and people do linger (especially in the moonlight after seeing Dvorak’s Rusalka).

The closest I’ve come to this in the US was at Santa Fe Opera and Glimmerglass Opera (now Festival) near Cooperstown NY. Both are in remote locations, Santa Fe on a bluff above a desert valley with the lights of Los Alamos glistening in the distance, and Glimmerglass off a county highway. Both have attractive
newer opera houses partly exposed to the elements, but neither has the estate grounds that turn a performance into a full afternoon and evening of leisure, camaraderie, and relaxed lingering as happens at Glyndebourne. I was alone during my visit, yet never felt alone; everyone I spoke to was warm and engaging. I never felt the tension of strangers. And, yes, they loved to compare opera notes, yet nothing else seemed off-bounds.

Glyndebourne, you see, involves an investment not just of money but of time. The money thing first: yes, 75% of the almost sold-out audiences are members, meaning big bucks at an event where black tie is the suggested dress code (to be taken with a grain of salt, as you will see). Glyndebourne, like companies in the US, is given almost no government support and relies on benefactors and patrons for. But college-age people and do-it-yourself packers also attend; the Friday night crowd whistled and whooped like students do in the US. Seats range from about US$65 to $325, with good seats available for $100 to $150. For those under 30, tickets cost about $37—less than half of a Buffalo Bills football game.

But, more than money, Glyndebourne is an investment of time: a trip to Lewes (pronounced like Lewis) from London’s Victoria Station by train (70 minutes) or from Brighton by train (15 minutes), plus the free transfer from Lewes to Glyndebourne (15 minutes), then an afternoon and evening at the opera, and home again, consumes almost a whole day. But it’s the attitude that’s unique—a holiday atmosphere, a classy celebration, Sunday-best clothes, sumptuous English gardens, flowers, the earth and sky, meals with family and friends—and we haven’t even discussed the operas themselves yet! It’s the perfect antidote to the American compulsion for work, iPhones, the perpetual harassment of staying connected, then rushing to an evening opera, etc. Come to think of it, I don’t recall seeing cell phones at Glyndebourne except when the pre-performance announcement reminded people to turn them off.

Of the productions I saw, Rusalka was by far the most sublime. An image lingers here too: Rusalka’s entrance, as her 15-foot mermaid’s tail slowly emerges from the flies with her hovering body suspended in the air, silver lining accenting her black body-wrap against a deep blue underwater backdrop, followed by seven other descending water nymphs. They, of course, were introduced by a witch’s brew of chorus and three goblins cavorting to a wicked Slavonic-like folk dance, tightly and pungently accentuated by Glyndebourne Music Director Robin Ticciati (he’s English, but the name is pronounced Italian-style, Titchy-AH-tee) and one of the house’s two resident orchestras, the London Philharmonic—flawless, with superb principals, silken strings, and hand-in-glove ensemble. One drawback: Dvorak wrote a warm, supportive tuba line for this opera; if it was there, I don’t recall it.

Bass Alexander Roslavets was comic, powerful, and rich-voiced as Vodnik, Rusalka’s priapic horny father. As Rusalka, Sally Matthews had an enclosed head tone and a bit too much vibrato in the ‘Song of the Moon,’ during which she was beautifully framed lying on her back under a spotlight. Like her, Evan LeRoy Johnson as the Prince didn’t have enough resonance to project his sound. But Irish mezzo Patricia Bardon as Jezibaba did have both poetry and resonance. From start to finish, Ticciati wove every vocal and orchestral melodic and harmonic nuance around one another, becoming tenderest in the final poignant scene, where Matthews and Johnson were at their best.

This esthetically gorgeous production, directed by Melly Still and beautifully designed by Rae Smith, caught both the fairy tale aspect of the story (the Macbeth- or Purcell-like witch’s-brew red-glowing cauldron into which Rusalka was immersed, emerging human-like but mute) and the human poignancy of yearning for love that could never be fulfilled.

Both Rusalka and Berlioz’s Damnation of Faust are the tale of someone accursed with wanting to be more than she or he can be. Rusalka sings, “My purity and love will defeat the curse.” Her problem is naivete; Faust’s is intellectual arrogance, lust, and greed. In the Berlioz Ticciati had the LPO perform in period style—a brilliant decision. Without string vibrato, the woodwinds were dominant—even more so than the brass. Good thing too, because it is the woodwinds’ ornamentations, exaggerated accents, and stringent harmonies that portray Faust’s and Mephistopheles’s ugly motives. Baroque timpani were lean but pungent. With Ticciati everything was impeccably balanced, crisp, and vertically aligned; but forward dynamism (the conductor’s main weakness) was minimal, including a very tame ‘Hungarian March’.
It was during Faust that I appreciated the qualities of the opera house itself. The horseshoe auditorium, which opened 25 years ago, is completely indoors. Usually sitting in the last row in the second balcony under an overhang is my least favorite seat because it’s too far from the stage and the acoustics are deadened. But not in this comfortable 1,200-seat hall! The orchestra’s sound surrounded me; orchestra and singers were in perfect balance. Also, from this vantage the visual quality of the house’s pine wood, gently accented by soft lighting, was stunning, and the sight lines were unimpaired.

The Faust chorus (this year’s young artists) first appeared as observers with devil’s masks in two galleries across and above the back of the blackened stage. Their sound was terrific, especially the men in the great fugal Amen. Pantomine rather than props told the story. Allan Clayton as Faust could really float his lyrical lines as when singing of his vision of Marguerite (Canadian Julie Boulianne), whose own Renée Fleming-like voice was filled with feeling. Their duet was lovely, and her ‘Vous etes mon Prince Charmant’ without an ounce of softness; nor was she able to keep held notes steady, going a whole note flat as the night wore on. Even worse was Agnes Zwierko (the mother) whose pitches in Act IV were excruciating. At one point she did a striptease! Lindsey also was too heavy and forceful for this delicate, floating fairy tale; her last note at the end of Act II was a full pitch off! Worst of all was conductor John Wilson, who made the LPO sound utterly prosaic, without tone quality or any special balances, just an efficient workman’s sound. At several points I, an orchestral fanatic, realized I had even stopped hearing the orchestra. It didn’t support or interlace with the singers; it merely supplied a background beat. How can someone conduct this beautiful opera without an ounce of romanticism? No one applauded during any of the four acts.

What a contrast to the revival of Annabel Arden’s production of Rossini’s Barber of Seville! Venezuelan Rafael Payere, 39, the new music director of the San Diego Symphony, gave the LPO just the right kind of crisp clarity, buoyancy, upturned rhythms, and lyricism that supported and wound around the soloists; and fortepianist James Sherlock’s impishness really underlined the recitative’s comic confusion and fussiness. The absurdity of

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of the plot—summarized near the end as Rosina (Hera Heysang Park), Figaro (Andrey Zhilikovsky), and Count Almaviva (Levy Sekgapane) dragged out an endless Beethovenian coda till the escape ladder disappeared—was so perfectly rendered that the audience laughed out loud.

I agreed with one patron who felt that some slapstick and stand-and-deliver in Act I had aspects of a student production; but things caught fire in Act II. Alessandro Corbelli, 67, as Bartolo was the cast’s truly mature voice and actor (Park rendered him limp as she caressed him at the keyboard, in a rare tenderly voiced moment). South African Sekgapane, with his unmodulated “open wide and say ah” tenor, hardly had to disguise his voice to get a nasal quality in the opening aria of Act II. Zhilikovsky had a warm baritone voice but overacted with awful Italian gestures. Adam Palka displayed his beautiful baritone as Basilio, the cassocked, beatific music teacher.

The staging for Barber was simple but very effective: a small but ornamental balcony stage center for the first scenes; when it was lifted into the flies, the rest took place on a bare stage with wallpaper backdrop and large throw pillows portraying Rosina’s bedroom-lounge. The supertitles for all four operas were excellent: true to the text and story, but edited, sparing us a blizzard of word-for-word translation.

Someone asked me what my image of Glyndebourne was before I came. I said, “None”. I had only read reviews, until I was advised two days before leaving, “The dress code, by the way, is black-tie”. I then found my 40-year-old tuxedo no longer fit; so what was good enough for my father’s funeral would have to be good enough for the opera. (I brought the bow tie.) And it was! Ladies have an easier time with a formal sense of occasion and celebration; they displayed an array from evening gowns to elegant party dresses. The men stuck mostly with black suits (some tuxes) with bow ties (a few long ties). One Frenchman I congratulated on extending the code with a black suit coat and pants practical-ly tie-dyed with a luminescent royal blue wash and a black T-shirt. As Executive Chairman Gus Christie (grandson of founder John Christie) told me, “This is a festival. The seasonality keeps it fresh. Care of how you dress opens your mind to what you’re about to experience. It makes you put some work into it. There’s nothing wrong with dressing up. It’s a sense of occasion.”

Glyndebourne is conducive to reflection, which has a transforming, open effect on the audience, said Stephen Langridge. That and the company’s pioneering spirit are what attracted him to accept the new position of artistic director—in addition to the fact that he literally learned to walk on these very grounds back in the 1960s when his father Philip sang many tenor roles here. It is the third largest opera company in England after the Royal Opera (Covent Garden) and the English National Opera. Yes, like Santa Fe and Glimmerglass, it’s most famous as a summer opera, but its season is long. In 2020 from May 21 to August 30, Poulenc’s Dialogues of the Carmelites, Handel’s Alcina, Beethoven’s Fidelio, Donizetti’s Elixir of Love, Mozart’s Abduction from the Serail, and Stravinsky’s Rake’s Progress will rotate. Singers, including Danielle de Niese, Lisette Oropesa, and Ben Bliss next season, and production personnel are internationally known. The orchestras, as usual, will be the London Philharmonic and the much-recorded Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (for the Handel and Beethoven).

After the summer season Glyndebourne tours England for three months with three productions with performers mainly from its Young Artists Program. After two winter months off, the Glyndebourne Opera Cup will return in March, an international competition for opera singers with seven preliminary rounds in cities around the globe, then a week of semifinals with 20 singers and finals with 8 with the LPO; other years there are local community projects like youth operas. (Also, the Glyndebourne Academy develops talents from non-traditional backgrounds.) And then rehearsals start for the new summer season. Langridge puts emphasis on empathy and imagination in story-telling, whether in comedy or tragedy; he’s not interested in triviality.

If you’re tempted to attend, I recommend staying in Brighton, from which it’s a 15-minute commuter train trip to Lewes, where you catch the free double-decker shuttle to Glyndebourne. It’s a 67-minute train trip from London’s Victoria Station. Driving from London can take a miserable 2 to 2-1/2 hours. I preferred the hassle-free atmosphere of Brighton with its broad cultural mix that spans from 1960s deja vu all over again and the...
anything by Richard Strauss. In this opera, as in almost all his music, he takes us from frivolity to rapture. The frivolity is silly and almost Broadway (though Strauss was proud of his sense of humor), but the rapture is Strauss’s own brand, and it’s gorgeous.

In July Cincinnati Opera set the whole thing in the Crosley mansion in Cincinnati—Mr Crosley became the patron of the entertainers, complete with radio coverage (WLW). The only scenery for Ariadne’s island was a big painting of an island and sea on the wall. Powel Crosley actually had an organ in his mansion, so it didn’t sound odd that it accompanied much of what Ariadne sang (Strauss wrote it that way, but I suspect it is often almost inaudible). It’s also conceivable that he would hire a bunch of comedians and an opera company to perform the same evening but maybe not simultaneously.

The way this works out is in a contrast between a woman who loves once (Ariadne) and one who gives herself to many (Zerbinetta). Ariadne pines away and seems love-sick to the point of death; Zerbinetta bounces around joyfully, gushing over every handsome man she sees. And the way this was staged implied that this is still going on—it’s human nature.

Only in this staging have I seen the Composer falling for Zerbinetta (and she for him—or her, since Strauss made the Composer a soprano). The opera part of the opera is in German, but the rest—and the dialog—was in English. That set the contrasts even stronger. So much of what was sung in German could have been Wagner! It was fascinating to see how the languages were used to underline the plot.

When the opera got really heavy, the comedy part did drop out; it had to for the opera to come across. And the contrast fixed our attention more closely on the singers and music (as opposed to the plot or premise, which by then was immaterial).

And when Bacchus appeared at the end (almost a deus ex machina) he was a heroic Wagnerian tenor! Wow! We all shivered. The thrilling tenor was Kyle Van Schoonhoven, and he is young enough that one can predict a great career. His voice has not just power but character.

Ariadne was Twyla Robinson; she was perfectly adequate but not spectacular. Liv Redpath was Zerbinetta—wild coloratura and all—but Zerbinetta usually does steal this show, as she promises from the beginning. (It is an opera about an opera, and the comedians think opera is boring and needs a lot of help.)

The Cincinnati Symphony was glorious, especially as the music became so ecstatic near the end. The Cleveland Orchestra did this six or eight months ago, and people who heard it said the quality of the orchestra was a major factor there, too. Part of the credit here must go to the conductor, Jun Märkl, he knew how to build it so that it stopped sounding episodic and demanded your full involvement. The audience was full of veteran opera fans, many of whom I knew. We were all overwhelmed and full of praise—and some would consider us a hardened bunch who had seen and heard everything.