

To stage or not to stage

Is semi-staged opera a solution, or a problem in itself? **Jane Oakland** takes the recent production of Jonathan Harvey's *Wagner Dream* as a case study



Staged: *Wagner Dream* at the Holland Festival

It is no secret that opera is one of the most expensive art forms to produce. Even when playing to packed houses, the enormous overheads can never be met without considerable government or private subsidy. Advances in technology have not only added to these spiralling costs but have also raised audience expectations as to what can be experienced in an opera house in terms of visual effects. While this may help opera appeal to a wider public, it can also be at the cost of commercial viability.

I recently took part in *Wagner Dream*, a new opera by Jonathan Harvey, which had its world premiere in Luxembourg earlier this year. It is a powerful and compelling work but was also a hugely expensive production, largely due to the complex technical and logistical requirements. Subsequently, the final two performances in Paris were presented in a semi-staged format. It was this that prompted me to consider the whole concept of semi-staging and the effect it might have on opera production in general. Is it just a convenient way to cut costs by introducing the 'no frills approach' to opera staging, or can there be advantages dramatically by losing what many people might view as overindulgent technology? Before looking at these issues in greater depth it is necessary to consider what is actually implied by the term 'semi-staged'.

Contrary to images of a minibus filled with young, enthusiastic singers taking grand opera to village halls in the Scottish Highlands, the term 'semi-staged' appears to be taking on a more sophisticated meaning. Opera can now be seen in most major concert venues worldwide, billed either as a concert performance, semi-staged performance or even dramatic concert. Opera director Michael Scarola goes a step further when he describes a recent production as 'the next level up from a semi-staged opera'. He told *New Jersey Opera News*: 'It was Dvořák's *Rusalka* and we had a six-foot pool of water on stage'. The situation is further compounded by the recent trend to stage oratorio such as Sir Jonathan Miller's *St Matthew Passion*. In an interview about the work, he denounced the whole concept of semi-staging and claimed his production was fully staged but without

costumes and scenery.

So where does semi-staging end and full staging begin? Things have certainly moved on since the days when singers clad in evening dress clutched their scores and made occasional embarrassing gestures to each other. It is now much more common to see choreography, theatrical costumes and the use of props on a costume platform (although the appearance of a swimming pool could be considered somewhat excessive). As a consequence, defining what constitutes a concert or theatrical performance of opera is becoming less clear. The public might be forgiven for feeling confused about what they are likely to experience when attending these types of performances. The term 'semi-staged' is at best ambiguous and at worst misleading.

At present semi-staging is a developing concept and as such it is impossible to impose an actual definition on the term. But even if the terminology is ambiguous, the artistic reasons for using a particular staging concept should not be.

Financial costs are of course a major factor when considering staging options. Reducing the cost of staging and rehearsal time has the advantage of giving the public the chance to hear, in close proximity, world names that might be too expensive to be employed for a run of staged productions. It is also a chance for lesser-known operas to be heard without the risk of an expensive theatre staging.

From the point of view of the artists, semi-staging is not only a chance for young singers to gain experience of a role before being subjected to the pressures of a full blown theatrical production, it can also benefit experienced singers. Olga Borodina sang a concert performance of *Delilah* in Holland this year. The opera by Saint-Saëns is not often produced, possibly because the cost of razing a temple to the ground for a run of ten performances can be somewhat prohibitive. Borodina acknowledged this point in an interview for the Dutch Radio. She also admitted that, without the possibility of a concert hall setting, opportunities to sing a role that she feels she has made her own would be limited.

Lowering the financial costs of staging certainly has the advantage of being able to offer a greater and more varied

programme of opera for both audience and performer but what effect does this have on the dramatic elements of opera? Again there can be certain advantages to minimal staging. Opera directors frequently try to stir the imagination of audiences by setting productions in different periods or adding surreal effects that are often more decorative than functional. Lack of scenery can encourage audiences to fill in the background with their imagination. Inter-character relationships can be developed, as opposed to them being imposed by heavy directorial demands.

However, it should not be forgotten that opera is still a theatrical form of art. The emotional content of opera constitutes a complex mix of musical texture, artistry, vocal coloration, and visual effect to give what one singer described to me as 'an almost spiritual experience'. In other words, at its best opera is a holistic experience for both performer and audience. Taking away part or all of the staging challenges both parties to create that spirituality using only the music and the most basic visual cues.

Some years ago I took part in a concert version of *Tosca* with the Vienna Philharmonic. The staging consisted of little more than a few choreographed moves for the soloists, but the orchestra, instead of being relegated to the pit, immediately became part of the drama. Indeed, this close fusion of voices and instruments can actually heighten dramatic tension. The experience my colleagues and I had of sitting in the midst of such a world-class orchestra singing the Te Deum can only be described as electrifying. The audience were enthralled as Neil Shicoff made his entrance through the auditorium, allowing them to experience his vocal power at close range. At the end of the evening it was clear that this performance had made an impact on performers and audience alike. Although *Tosca* is standard repertoire in most opera houses, the chance to experience the close proximity of such world-class musicians is not.

Nevertheless, while this concept may have worked with a popular, accessible piece, an unknown opera such as *Wagner Dream* might have difficulty in achieving such dramatic effect without the impact of full staging. If opera is to move away from its elitist reputation and generate wider public interest, effective staging can undoubtedly help: 21st-century technology is available for use on the opera stage and if opera is to remain a contemporary art form, it would be wrong not to make use of it. Interestingly, when talking to colleagues about this subject, many feel that innovative technological effects can actually enhance the music, provided that it does not put them in any physical danger and that what is used serves a dramatic function rather than the ego of the director.

The full staging of *Wagner Dream* made ample use of technical resources both musically and theatrically. Jonathan Harvey's opera deals with a conflict of cultures, that of eastern Buddhist ideals and the realities of the Wagner household. Musically these different worlds are distinguished using a mix of actors and singers together with a large array of acoustic and electronic sound colours. One of the challenges faced by director Pierre Audi and his team was to portray the two worlds simultaneously on the stage in a manner that was comprehensible to an audience. A double stage was used, built around the orchestra, thereby including them in the drama. Powerful lighting features distinguished between the two cultures and created eerie dream-like silhouettes reflected against the scenery. A few pyrotechnics, a semi-nude red goddess and the odd video clip added to the dramatic effect. It was certainly a total concept with much to experience musically and visually, possibly too much for a single viewing.

Changing this concept into a semi-staged version left the cast initially feeling confused as to how the same dramatic effect could be achieved without the help of this elaborate, though stylised staging. The venue for the reduced staging was also a theatre, which facilitated considerably more lighting effects than would be possible in a concert hall. The orchestra were even more integrated with the performers in

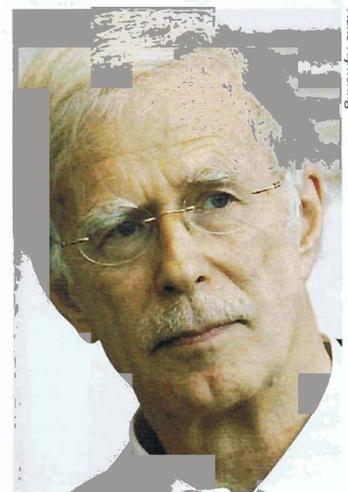
this version and it seemed that this close proximity led to a greater intensity of sound, and more spontaneity from all the performers, as different sounds and colours could be heard. The fact that the costumes were black and the lighting stark also gave added focus to the visual aspects. An important factor, however, is that the cast had already worked intensively on a full staging. This experience was able to enhance the semi-staging by adding a deeper layer of characterisation, which might not have been possible without the long rehearsal period. Although it is fair to say that there were some dramatic moments that could have been clearer, the project as a whole was considered a success.

Perhaps the comments of composer Jonathan Harvey himself provide the best evaluation, not only of *Wagner Dream* but also of staging in general: 'I would suspect each audience member retained in consciousness a quite narrow selection of what was offered, yet still had an impression that the opera was colourful and many-faceted (even if the production might be termed fairly minimal). That's normal in opera, which is surely why we see each opera many times quite happily. The other version reduced the width of sensual intake but not the depth. The narrow band of colours, the limited dramatic gestures without props, effects and big movements, all concentrated the laser beam of attention to the core of meaning in a powerful way.

'And to anyone who was put off by any costume, scenic incongruity or video moment in the full version, there would have been nothing to distract from the central core meaning contained in simply voices, instruments, libretto and musical structures. You risk less with the semi-staged version, but for some the concentrated effect is stronger. The staged version is more sensory and at times spectacularly so, thus remaining in memory as image. Whereas the semi-staged, "black" version remains in memory as pure drama, pure emotion. I loved both.'

Comparing the two versions of *Wagner Dream* has highlighted some of the advantages to be had if semi-staging is well thought out. It also highlights the difficulties in actually defining the term. Both are theatrical pieces in their own right but offer different perspectives. Inevitably the 'black' version is likely to have greater commercial appeal due to the lower risk element. This may be no bad thing if it allows the opera to be given wider coverage but as a performer, I missed the broad spectrum of colour and the extra visual effects that gave the total theatrical experience. It is a real concern that if opera in general can be seen to work successfully as a semi-staged or minimalist enterprise, funding may become even more difficult to obtain for larger-scale productions.

Returning to the general discussion of the use of the term 'semi-staging', this article has only just scratched the surface of a very complex issue. Every type of musical performance is a staged event. Is it really necessary to use the terms 'full' and 'semi', implying that one is inferior to the other? For now though, it appears that semi-staging, in its various forms, is here to stay. While it can add deeper layers of understanding and more focus to operatic performance, I feel it should not be at the expense of a total theatrical, spiritual experience. They are two very different concepts. The growing trend towards semi-staging should be carefully thought about if it is not to contribute to the downsizing of an already struggling art form. ●



Hans Hinring

'You risk less with the semi-staged version, but for some the concentrated effect is stronger' - Jonathan Harvey