

The Lyon king

Our critic revels in Serge Dorny's Britten festival in France's second city



Sound of the sea: Peter Grimes packs a powerful punch at Opéra de Lyon (Jean-Pierre Maurin)

Everyone else did Britten to death during last year's 100th anniversary, of course, but Opéra de Lyon's Serge Dorny — general director of the London Philharmonic until he took up his French opera post in 2003 — has cannily postponed his Festival Britten, the more to get noticed, to 2014.

Opéra de Lyon is a “*stagione*” house — essentially focusing on one opera or ballet production per month — but the festivals he has instituted since 2005, when he presented a Janacek “trilogy” (Jenufa, Katya Kabanova, Makropoulos, in Nikolaus Lehnhoff's fabled Glyndebourne stagings), offer three opera evenings in three days. My last visit was in 2012, when David Pountney's production of Puccini's *Trittico* was staged, for several evenings, in consecutive double bills with near-contemporary German operas by Schoenberg, Hindemith and Zemlinsky.

Unlike the deluxe, high-priced European Easter festivals in Berlin, Baden-Baden and Salzburg, Dorny opts for “festival” pieces, not mainstream repertoire crowd-pullers. Next year's festival is built around Franz Schreker's lurid 1914 melodrama *Die Gezeichneten* (The Stigmatized). Dorny's inventive programming was one of the reasons he was appointed as *Intendant* of the Dresden State Opera late last year, only for the post never to materialise, possibly because it conflicted with the artistic responsibilities of the Staatsorchester's principal conductor, Christian Thielemann. Opera lovers in Lyon are presumably breathing a sigh of relief as he will now continue as *directeur* of the Opéra in France's second city. For his Britten bonanza, he revived Olivier Py's 2008 production of the church parable, *Curlew River*, seen at that year's Edinburgh Festival, preceded by new productions of Peter Grimes and *The Turn of the Screw*, with directors from quite different theatrical backgrounds: Grimes went to Yoshi Oida, acclaimed in Britain for his sparsely beautiful Aldeburgh staging of Britten's *Death in Venice*, which OdL co-produced and featured in Opera North's Festival of Britten last autumn.

For Britten's masterly chamber opera, based on Henry James's most famous novella, Dorny opted for a member of the Spanish theatre troupe La Fura dels Baus, Valentina Carrasco, directing solo. Both productions adopt a quite different aesthetic from most British stagings — although Oida's costume designer is a Brit, Richard "The Lion King" Hudson. It is a measure of the sturdy dramatic structure and durability of Britten's masterpieces that both Grimes and Turn of the Screw pack a powerful punch in Lyon, above all musically, thanks to music director Kazushi Ono's impassioned conducting and brilliant playing from the OdL's orchestra.

If Oida's Grimes seems a bit "zen" compared with, say, David Alden's polemical and provocative staging for ENO, it looks beautiful. Tom Schenk's stage pictures are rearrangements of contemporary shipping containers — Hudson's costumes are late-19th/early-20th century — ravishingly lit by Lutz Deppe. The Japanese director creates an entirely believable Borough community, whose transformation from relative normality to a baying mob in the manhunt scene is probably closer in spirit to Britten's conception than Alden's, but these characters are less vividly etched than the American director's. Michaela Kaune's gorgeously sung Ellen — her words could be more incisive — and Andrew Foster Williams's Balstrode are uncharacterised. In the title role, Alan Oke draws on his success in Tim Albery's award-winning Grimes on the Beach at last year's Aldeburgh Festival. His is a light-voiced Grimes, but, as in Aldeburgh, he rises harrowingly to the histrionic demands of the mad scene.

Among the supporting cast, Kathleen Wilkinson's mumsy Auntie, Colin Judson's hectoring Bob Boles and Karoly Szemeredy's accented but powerfully projected Swallow stand out, while Rosalind Plowright proves unexpected but inspired casting as the most glamorous Mrs Sedley I've ever encountered. Even a dowdy grey wig can't conceal her statuesque beauty, and her low notes make me wonder if she wasn't always a dark-toned mezzo-soprano.

Carrasco's Turn of the Screw is staged as a nightmare, in which furniture flies in and out, the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel appear as if from nowhere (the latter's emergence from the lake is the spookiest I've seen) and the entire stage becomes enmeshed in a huge spider's web, through which the ghosts weave a red thread, spelling out "innocence" in the Colloquy scene. Who has spun this web? The ghosts or the Governess? Certainly, Miles directs his final words, "Peter Quint, you devil", directly to the Governess, answering her question and calling her a devil — an entirely valid, even shocking interpretation. The ambiguity of the Governess's line, "Together we have destroyed him" — she means that she and Miles have destroyed Quint, but she and Quint have clearly destroyed Miles — is forcibly conveyed.

Earlier, the very young Heather Newhouse seems prematurely cast as the Governess, and I wondered whether Giselle Allen — one of the most experienced Jessels in the business — might not have been given a crack at the leading soprano role. Andrew Tortise's eerily sung Quint makes a much stronger impression, but Katharine Goeldner seems miscast as a youthful and very casual Mrs Grose, more contemporary childminder than housekeeper. Miles and Flora are sinister blond Midwich Cuckoos as played and sung by Remo Ragonese and Loleh Pottier, members of the OdL's Maîtrise (children's choir). As ever, and thanks to Ono's taut conducting, Britten's masterpiece weaves its haunting spell, to chilling effect.

Hugh Canning