

Welcome to world of music

By David Kettle

A 300-year-old opera diva; a country's history evoked in sound; youthful musicians mingling with some of the world's most established figures; a childhood classic rescued from beneath Christmas tinsel. It could only be the Edinburgh International Festival, whose musical events this year, after 2011's excursion into Asia, cast their net seemingly across the whole globe in one of the most eclectic programmes seen for a long time.

Maybe it was competition from a certain London sporting event that was on Festival director Jonathan Mills's mind when he was planning his 2012 events. In any case, the Festival itself plays host to key performances in the London 2012 Festival, from Polish theatre group TR Warszawa's bloody 2008: *Macbeth*, to *Speed of Light* from Glasgow-based collaborative arts group NVA - a spectacle that sees a walking audience watching light-suited runners pounding the pathways of Arthur's Seat, the city's very own volcano.



David et Jonathas, one of Charpentier's most dramatic stage works

Certainly, the International Festival cannot ignore the sport happening down south, but its take on Olympic themes is refreshingly oblique. British pride in its national bard is reflected not only in a Polish *Macbeth* and a solo performance of *The Rape of Lucrece* from singer Camille O'Sullivan, but also in a Shakespeare-themed concert from the Scottish Chamber Orchestra under one of the founding fathers of the period-instrument movement, Sir Roger Norrington.

Austrian mezzo-soprano Angelika Kirchschlager sings Berlioz's languid *Les nuits d'été*, settings of poems by Théophile Gautier inspired by the great English dramatist. But the main event is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or at least Mendelssohn's vivid incidental music to it, with its magical evocations of the fairy world.

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that return pieces to their original instruments and performance styles, it is sure to be a fascinating evening.

Elsewhere in the music programme, Mills seems to be setting out to prove that, if music is a sport, then its true athletes are the remarkable young performers already making international waves at the beginnings of their careers. There's a whole raft of them in the morning concerts taking place in the intimate surroundings of the Queen's Hall, from multi-award-winning Russian pianist Daniil Trifonov to American hotshots the Calder Quartet, dubbed the new Kronos by some.

But it is visits from two of the world's brightest - and biggest - young orchestras that should prove what youthful players can achieve together. The revered Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester tackles two late-Romantic giants - its namesake's Seventh Symphony, alongside music from Wagner's *Parsifal* - under conductor Daniele Gatti. And the European Union Youth Orchestra, gathered together from the top young players across the whole of the EU, has a startling programme contrasting the UK premiere of a new Olympic-themed work from British composer Richard Causton with Busoni's grand Piano Concerto. If you have never encountered a piano concerto that also requires a chorus of singers, now's your chance.

Youth is also a theme in Charpentier's *David et Jonathas*, one of the festival's several opera offerings. Conducted by the peerless French Baroque expert William Christie, it's a passionate plea for peace that contrasts a tender relationship between the young Biblical figures of David and Jonathan with bloody conflict between the Israelites and Philistines. German director Andreas Homoki has updated the action to an unnamed Mediterranean land in the early 20th century, and employs an intriguing wooden-frame set that varies its size and shape to comment on the developing story.

Alongside a quartet of new chamber operas from Scottish Opera, the Festival's other operatic highlight is Janáček's thriller *The Makropulos Case*, a strange tale of a 300-year-old opera singer and her desperate search for the potion that brings her immortality. Opera North unveils its new production by Tom Cairns at the Festival, and Swedish soprano Ylva Kihlberg is sure to make waves in the central role, as much for her commanding stage presence as for the purity of her voice.



The exceptional players of the European Union Youth Orchestra

The Festival's recently appointed Honorary President Valery Gergiev has long been called a workaholic because of his endless globe-trotting and his punishing schedule, and that is not an impression undermined by the major role he plays in this year's Edinburgh events.

He is clearly taking his new responsibilities seriously. As well as conducting what promises to be a sumptuous production of Prokofiev's fairytale ballet *Cinderella*, fresh from St Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre where he is artistic director, Gergiev brings the London Symphony Orchestra for a four-concert residency in the Usher Hall, contrasting symphonies by Brahms and Szymanowski. It is an unusual combination - Brahms's passions simmer beneath a polished veneer of decorum, while hot-headed Szymanowski glories in sensuous, brightly hued sounds - but it's one, says Gergiev, that should shed new light on both figures.

Among other visiting groups, the Cleveland Orchestra under Franz Welser-Möst spreads Smetana's evocative *Má Vlast* across a two-concert residency, contrasting the Czech composer's magical evocations of his country's history and traditions with the glittering music of Lutoslawski. And returning to the fairytale theme, Spanish conductor Josep Pons leads the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in one of his childhood favourites, Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* - proving, of course, that the well-loved fantasy fable isn't just for Christmas, but for the whole of the year.

There is plenty more, naturally. Delius's epic *A Mass of Life* from the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. German mezzo-soprano Waltraud Meier in recital. Gypsy Bartók from the Budapest Festival Orchestra. But it seems that, even without an overall theme, this year's Edinburgh International Festival is one of the richest yet.

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