

# Many directors are happy to play Mozart's *opera buffa* for laughs. Christophe Honoré wants to get you thinking about racism too, writes David Kettle

**T**here's no getting away from it: Mozart and da Ponte's *Così fan tutte* is a bit of a "problem" opera. A sparkling comedy, but with a jet-black undertow. Just like Shakespeare's most famous problem play, *Measure for Measure* – which itself gets a politically charged reboot from Cheek by Jowl and Moscow's Pushkin Theatre at this year's International Festival – *Così* nestles its comedic high jinks in amongst issues of sex and morality so raw and relevant that its laughs might just catch in the throat.

The basic story is elegantly simple. Egged on by older guy Don Alfonso, pals Ferrando and Guglielmo agree to put their lovers' fidelity to the test. Pretending to leave but returning in disguise, the two chums set about trying to seduce each other's woman. It's a set-up that goes right back to classical literature, and while the opera was frowned upon as immoral in the 19th century, we've come to accept that Mozart's sublime musical setting reveals the work's profound truths about human relations. He leaves us in no doubt that none of his quartet of lovers will emerge unscathed from this rather alarming game – even if it was almost certainly he who insisted on the opera's faintly unsavoury title, which lays the blame for any infidelities squarely on its female figures: it roughly translates as "All women are like that".

*Così* has plenty of laughs, to be sure, not least in the oblivious vacillations of friends Dorabella and Fiordiligi as to whether they should give in to the supposed strangers' advances, and also in the two friends' increasingly

desperate attempts to woo them. But it poses a challenge for directors, too – whether to blithely ignore the opera's underlying cruelty, to simply ride it out, or to tackle it head-on.

French director Christophe Honoré, whose brand new production comes straight to the International Festival after its unveiling at the Aix-en-Provence Festival in July, has taken the latter course. And then some. He relocates his *Così* from 18th-century Naples to Mussolini's colonial Africa in the 1930s, in what is now Eritrea. "They are in the middle of nowhere, lost, shut away in a tiny expatriate community where their power is assured, and they exploit it," he explains. "Anything could happen here, seemingly without there ever being any serious consequences." And using that setting, Honoré adds another taboo issue to the opera's already savage dissection of sexual ruthlessness: race.

Honoré isn't a such well-known figure this side of the Channel, but in his native France he's held in high esteem as a journalist, novelist, playwright and film director, with several high-profile theatre productions at the Avignon Festival to his name, as well as a clutch of well-regarded movies – his 2011 film *Les bien-aimés*, with Chiara Mastroianni



**The requirement that the two white singers black up has disturbing resonances**

and Catherine Deneuve, was chosen to close Cannes that year. He's a relative newcomer to opera, however, although he directed Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* in 2013 and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 2015, both for Lyon Opera.

"Accepting the invitation to direct an opera was an opportunity for me to discover a foreign place, one unknown to me, and devoid of all preconceived ideas," he explains. "And it was an opportunity for me to practise my incompetence. I believe strongly in incompetence. Not knowing how to do something is often the best way of doing it. It's not a question of ignorance, but instead of innocence, incompleteness." And judging by the critical reaction to his *Così*'s opening in Aix, Honoré has come up with a startlingly fresh perspective on the opera, one that prods and pokes at the work's underlying questions to unapologetically provoke and challenge its audience.

"In choosing to place the story in Africa, in an Italian colony between the wars, I'm not looking to bring a political reading to the work," Honoré continues, "but to create images, an atmosphere and an unfamiliarity made up of heat, sensuality and violence. These elements combine with Mozart's music and, in the shift in meaning they impose on it, make us more aware in our listening."

His specific setting is Asmara, now capital of Eritrea, remodelled from an ancient site as Mussolini's "new Rome" in the 1930s by the Italian fascists. "It's a city that's absolutely unique in Africa," Honoré explains, "one that was constructed according







**Honoré's controversial *Così*, set in colonial Eritrea, was unveiled at Aix**

to Italian aesthetic ideas of the 1930s. Eritrea remains today profoundly marked by this city, especially from a cultural point of view."

And when Honoré's Guglielmo and Ferrando disguise themselves, it's not as the mysterious Albanians originally indicated by Mozart and da Ponte, but as Ascari, black Eritrean mercenaries who sold their services to Mussolini's colonial regime. With the inevitable requirement that the two white singers black up – something with disturbing resonances for a predominantly white, middle-class Western audience. "Obviously, the sickening side to this blacking-up is also intended to reveal the racist ideology of the Italian colonisers at the time," adds Honoré. And it also serves to cast a whole new light on the opera's ongoing attractions and rejections between the two young women and their mysterious foreign suitors.

"If the women reject them in Act 1," Honoré continues, "what drives them is a physical contempt and disgust. And when they begin to fall for them in Act 2, it's because of a fascination and desire for these men's bodies, which they've always denied they'd have any physical contact with." It's also a pointed way of sidestepping the enormous suspension of disbelief required to accept that Dorabella and Fiordiligi don't see through the disguises of their lovers Ferrando and Guglielmo. "The women cannot recognise their lovers in the two African men they see, since their culture and beliefs simply won't accept that Africans could be their equals," Honoré explains. "It seemed an interesting way of addressing some of today's issues about the

representation of minorities, while also responding to the question of the opera's 'Albanian disguise'."

Honoré has assembled a fine cast, including renowned French soprano Sandrine Piau as the women's hard-done-by maid Despina – a figure who's key to an understanding of the opera, according to the director. "This is the character who reveals the challenges of staging *Così*, I think. She can be to different degrees comic, loyal or oppressed, but I refuse to decide whether she's joyful or sad. Through her, I'd like this *Così* to be about both love and violence." Alongside a strong quartet of young singers as the four lovers, respected US baritone Rod Gilfrey plays the creepy Don Alfonso, the mastermind behind the romantic intrigues, whom Honoré sees as his own embodiment within the opera itself: "He's a brutal director in search of an unprecedented form – a modern, erotic poem proclaiming love and violence with equal force."

In front of respected period-instrument band the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra in the pit is young French conductor Jérémie Rhorer, making his International Festival debut, who made his name with a string of adored Mozart operas at Paris's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. And flown in especially for *Così*'s crowd scenes are South Africa's Cape Town Opera Chorus – who, of course, bring their very own personal experience of colonial racism. It might only be Honoré's third opera production, but his *Così fan tutte* is clearly a bold, uncompromising vision, one that's sure to provoke and unsettle as much as it entertains.

***Così fan tutte*, Festival Theatre, 25, 27 and 28 August, 0131-473 2000 / [www.eif.co.uk](http://www.eif.co.uk)**



**HIGHLIGHTS**

**Das Rheingold**

It might not be the busiest year for opera at the International Festival – director Fergus Linehan admitted as much at the EIF's launch back in April, as well as hinting at more of a bumper opera year in 2017. But what 2016 might lack in raw numbers, it more than makes up for in sheer quality and profile.

At a relatively modest two-and-a-half hours, Das Rheingold serves

as the introductory evening to Wagner's monumental Ring cycle, and unveils the massive tetralogy's mythical world of gods and giants, dwarves and dragons, launching the inexorable unfolding of its epic storyline as the sinister Alberich steals the Rhinegold from the daughters of the river, incurring the jealous wrath of the gods.

It's given a concert performance in the Usher Hall by Valery Gergiev and his Mariinsky Opera, with a fine cast of soloists drawn from the company's ranks, including Vitalij Kowaljow, right, as Wotan, Ekaterina Semenchuk as Fricka, Mikhail Vekua



as Loge and Vladislav Sulimsky as Alberich.

Gergiev has seen his fair share of controversy as a Wagner conductor – the *Ring* cycle he toured around Britain a few years back met with mixed reactions, as much for its confused staging as for anything to do with Gergiev's music-making. But there's no denying the sheer power and passion of Gergiev's performances: he's an electric presence on the podium, and his *Rheingold* looks set to be one of the highlights among the International Festival's Usher Hall evenings.

**Usher Hall, 15 August**

**Heat, dust, Africa – and a**



## Norma

Bellini's *Norma* is this year's flagship opera offering, announced way back in November and already virtually guaranteed full houses at the Festival Theatre. It is not at all hard to see why: the big draw is Cecilia Bartoli, one of classical music's global superstars, and Moshe Leiser and Patrice Caurier's production has been essentially created around her.

In a similar way to Christophe Honoré's *Così fan tutte* (see below), it updates Bellini and Romani's tragic tale of love, rejection and revenge among ancient Druids to far more

modern times: the French Resistance struggling against Nazi occupation, with Norma concealing her illicit love for Pollione, chief of the German forces.

First unveiled at the 2013 Salzburg Whitsun Festival, which Bartoli directs, it has been called one of the great opera productions of the decade – as much for its musical innovations as for its emotional potency. Period instrument band I Barocchisti under Diego Fasolis plays a radical new edition of Bellini's score, which goes back to the composer's original intentions, restoring cuts and enriching the orchestration, and

thereby reminding us just what a sophisticated composer he is.

And Bartoli appropriates what's traditionally a soprano role – made iconic by Maria Callas back in the 1950s, most famously with stand-out aria "*Casta diva*" – for her lithe coloratura mezzo-soprano, with the historically informed justification that in Bellini's time, it was vocal quality and prowess rather than voice range label that would match a singer to a role. Anyone lucky enough to have already bagged themselves a ticket looks to be in for a treat.

***Festival Theatre, 5, 7 and 9 August***

**David Kettle**



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