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# BRAVE NEW WORLD

David Kettle finds media artist Gary Hill preparing to put a space-age spin on Beethoven's *Fidelio*

**B**eethoven has been sent to outer space. This version of his *Fidelio* sees singers on Segways, wearing gleaming metallic spacesuits, while intricate 3D animations swirl across the stage. Could this be the future of opera? American media artist Gary Hill (above, right) seems to think so, and his hi-tech, space-age production for Opéra de Lyon of the great German composer's only opera, touches down for two performances as part of the Edinburgh International Festival.

Respected worldwide for his interactive sound and video installations, Hill is nevertheless a self-confessed opera novice. 'I'd seen one or two operas in my life, and I didn't know *Fidelio* – I'm not a great expert on Beethoven, although I love his music.' Certainly, Beethoven's great operatic ode to liberty and truth, in which the ever-faithful Leonore rescues her husband Florestan from torture and starvation as a political prisoner under a brutal regime, is hardly the easiest place to start your career in directing opera.

But that fresh perspective might have paid off. Hill has hit upon a startlingly radical idea for his production, melding Beethoven's score with a classic work of sci-fi literature – Swedish

Nobel laureate Harry Martinson's *Aniara* from 1956. 'It's a mash-up between the two,' explains Hill. So how exactly did he come up with such an unlikely combination? 'It was a subconscious thing – I picked up the *Aniara* book one day and it came to me in a flash. I liked the idea of juxtaposing *Fidelio* and its heroic notions of love and freedom with the existential issues in *Aniara*, which has humanity on a spaceship hurtling towards oblivion. It's a situation not unlike the one we're in now – we're all on spaceship Earth, and we're all going to die. There's no getting away from it. But it was a way of getting people to look inside themselves and consciously face death, in order to live a more conscious life.'

And that's how Martinson's dark themes tie back in with *Fidelio*'s glowing optimism and faith in humanity. Not that this is an opera production in the traditional sense. The third component in Hill's multi-century collaborative rethinking of *Fidelio* is his own computer-animated trickery, which uses multiple layers of screens to give the illusion of objects dancing in 3D animated space. Digitally created soldiers march in perfect time to Beethoven's music; eagles emerge from huge gold coins; texts slide across the stage, fragment and tumble into space. 'If someone leaves the

stage and is doing something offstage,' Hill adds, 'you'll see them in the computer simulation as a computer-generated image, with their faces texture-mapped.'

'Probably the biggest challenge was producing those two to three hours of computer-generated images in just a couple of months,' he continues. 'And originally, I wanted to push things even further. I wanted almost no acting, and for the power of the singing to do the work, letting the digital images push the story through.' He limits movement, though, placing his singers on two-wheeled Segway buggies that carry out an elegant choreography throughout the show: 'It makes it all like a kind of dance.'

Hill admits that he wasn't able to go quite as far as he wanted in his bold reimagining of the opera. 'I spent a lot of time trying to make things happen, but it's a very conservative world. Nevertheless, the premiere was very well received.' Edinburgh audiences get the chance to decide for themselves in the next week whether Hill's hi-tech Beethoven mash-up could point towards the future of opera.

**Fidelio, Festival Theatre, 473 2000, 10 & 12 Aug, 7.15pm, £16-£68.**