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# Opera

'Ariadne auf Naxos' at Opera North  
Lidiya Yankovskaya speaks up for 'second' companies  
Oksana Taranenko on opera in Ukraine today  
Thomas Allen revisits Don Giovanni  
Latonia Moore—making her mark  
For the record: Ramón Vargas



# SECOND HOMES

LIDIYA YANKOVSKAYA TALKS TO SARAH NOBLE

‘It’s a beautiful opportunity,’ says Lidiya Yankovskaya. ‘A month of rehearsal, where the director, the singer and I get to think every day about every nuance of that emotional dramatic arc over the course of the piece. That is a luxury.’

Speaking over Zoom during a rare day off between concerts in Detroit and Knoxville, the Russian-American conductor is palpably excited about her upcoming appearances at English National Opera. The music director of Chicago Opera Theater since 2017, Yankovskaya has a string of recent North American debuts to her name, including with the Chicago Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic and Houston Grand Opera. But this will be her first trip to the UK since before the pandemic, when her Refugee Orchestra Project performed at LSO St Luke’s in 2019.

Fittingly for an artist who has championed experimental and contemporary works throughout her career, what’s bringing her back across the Atlantic is a somewhat unconventional ENO debut: Henryk Górecki’s *Symphony No. 3*, a work written for the concert hall rather than the opera house, and featuring just a single vocal soloist. Better known as the *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, Górecki’s setting of three meditative texts has been an audience favourite since the early 1990s, when a recording featuring Dawn Upshaw became an unlikely chart-topper; but, with the exception of Crystal Pite’s *Light of Passage* (coincidentally premiered in London by the Royal Ballet in

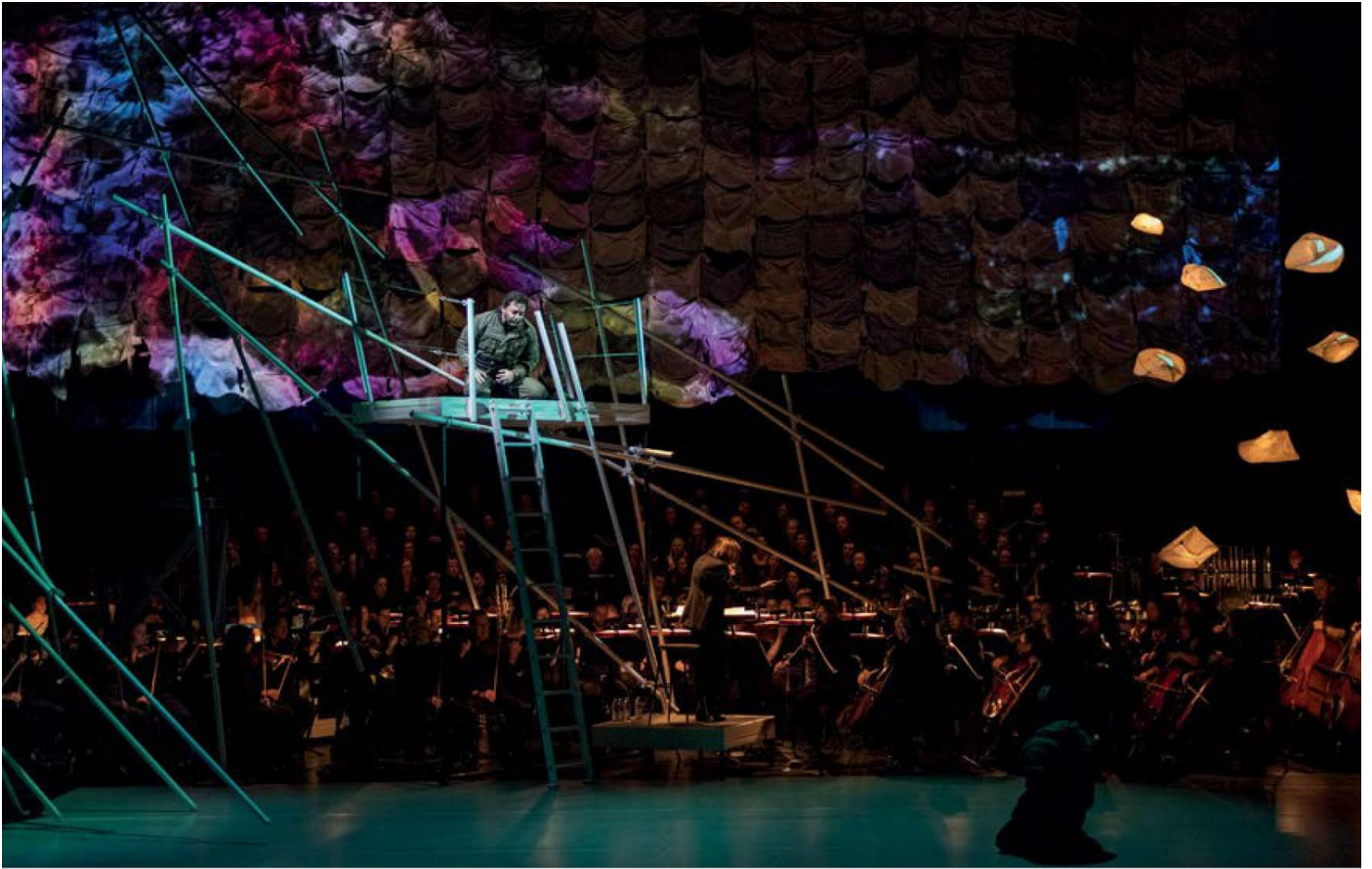
Lidiya Yankovskaya



2022), it has rarely been approached as a stage work.

Yankovskaya relishes the scope for interpretation. ‘It’s such an exciting and powerful opportunity, because of course with concert performances, one of the problems is that you never have that much rehearsal time. You just have a few days to put it together. And this is a piece that has so many emotional layers. So having an opportunity to really explore those over the course of an entire staging process, it’s really exciting.’

Those emotional layers arise in large part from the three texts that Górecki sets: all in his native language of Polish, all evoking themes of motherhood, separation and loss, but drawn from three vastly different sources. The first movement is a 15th-century lament by Mary, mother of Jesus, as she sees her son crucified; the third is based on a Silesian



*Yankovskaya conducting the Chicago Opera Theater's production of Joby Talbot's 'Everest', 2019*

folk song in which a mother searches for her lost son; and, most moving of all, the second movement sets a fragment of text scratched on the wall of her cell by a young Polish woman imprisoned by the Gestapo in 1944: 'No, mother, do not weep; most chaste queen of heaven, support me always.'

'This piece is about grief,' Yankovskaya explains. 'And one of the difficult things with grief is that it's such a universal thing that everybody experiences at some point or another. It's so profound but also so mundane.' The three texts, she believes, 'give specificity to the emotional power. And to me, that's the thing that music can do so powerfully because although we all experience it, we all experience grief in a very different way. And experiencing grief is a very lonely process.'

ENO's staging comes at a timely and poignant moment. While Górecki abandoned plans for additional texts which would have framed the work even more explicitly as a symphony 'about war', its evocation of the Holocaust, and of families torn apart by conflict, still hit home. As the war in Ukraine enters its second year, and the plight of displaced peoples is at the front of so many people's minds, does the Symphony take on a renewed significance? 'Absolutely,' says Yankovskaya. 'Unfortunately throughout history we repeat these atrocities and we don't learn from them. At any point in the history of the world there's always going to be a group of people for whom it's very personal.' Having moved to the US from St Petersburg as a refugee when she was a child, she counts herself among that group. 'I also have a great deal of family in Ukraine, some of whom have left only recently, some are still there, and it's devastating to see this war, and to see just how useless and stupid it is, how it doesn't seem to have any real reason behind it.'

ENO's production of the *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* will be directed and designed by Isabella Bywater, and while rehearsals are still months away when we speak, Yankovskaya is already full of praise for her approach. 'She's not fighting the music in any of it. She's not trying to force big pageantry on something that, in a way, is simple. Her designs draw from the impact of the piece, and of the music, and the things that are already there. A lot of it is about just bringing focus to the singer. The plan is to put the orchestra in the pit, and the singer will be on stage not only when she's singing, but through most of the piece. The hope is that that will help highlight this individual's journey, or that this individual is an embodiment of many different kinds of people and their emotional journey over the course of the work.'

All signs point to an intense evening of music-making, at a time when emotions at English National Opera are already running high. Though recently, after much political wrangling, offered a year's reprieve, the company is grappling with a calamitous cut to its Arts Council England grant, fuelled by the funding body's initial determination to push it wholesale out of London, a move that ENO has been strenuously resisting. The company has a fierce advocate in Yankovskaya, who, in addition to her relationship with Chicago Opera Theater, has also worked with Opera Boston and New York's Gotham Chamber Opera: all of them, as she puts it, 'second companies, for lack of a better word; the national company as opposed to the international company.'

'So often people don't realize just how critical that second company is to a city,' she says. 'The international companies have so much prestige and cachet behind them, and they're very important in their own right, because they allow us to share this international cultural heritage and to bring our works to other places. But they are massive behemoths that are weighed down by just how massive they are. They have a huge machinery behind them. And that machinery allows them to create these incredible giant works—but it makes these organizations very risk-averse.'

It is the smaller, leaner and more agile companies that drive the art form forward, she believes, often with a knock-on effect on those very 'behemoths' with whom they co-exist. She cites Boston as a prime example. 'What's interesting is that once Opera Boston disappeared, Boston Lyric Opera, the bigger company in the city, also started to have problems. The organizations strengthened each other, and that's also something that people don't think about.' In New York, meanwhile, Yankovskaya credits companies focused on new opera, such as Beth Morrison Projects, with encouraging the Metropolitan Opera to expand its own horizons: the Met recently announced renewed efforts to commission and produce new work, citing a shift in box-office trends. 'Those companies were so dedicated to developing new work that it pushed the Met to do more.' The Met has now committed to opening every season with a new production of a contemporary opera.

At home in Chicago, too, Yankovskaya sees parallels with the dynamic between London's Royal Opera House and ENO. 'Lyric Opera does these grand works on a huge scale, beautifully and fantastically, but for the ecosystem of the city it is absolutely essential to have an organization that focuses on supporting innovation—on driving what the art form means for this moment, and for this city, and for this place. Because the international companies are not going to have the freedom, so how do we develop this art form forward?'



*On the podium: Yankovskaya conducting at Dallas Opera*

She believes that such development can occur only through exploring repertoire beyond the warhorses and crowd-pleasers. ‘How do we speak for today through our art? You can’t just have a vacuum or an echo chamber of people doing the same thing, and doing the same repertoire. You need to have companies that are more nimble, that have the flexibility to innovate, because they are not responsible for the entire canon.’

Yankovskaya is especially passionate about the role such ‘second’ companies play in artist development, particularly of young and home-grown talent, preparing the next generation of performers for the world stage. Without that chance to hone their craft, she says, ‘you end up with people who jump straight out of nothing to these big houses, and their entire experience is just in those places, and it perpetuates the same kind of approach to everything’.

It will also, she says, lead to a widening gap between fringe productions on the smallest scale and the giant international houses, with no middle ground in between. ‘And then it’s impossible for even the most promising talent to jump to the high levels from there. You need this middle level, where the most exciting artists have an opportunity to do big projects, and to try their hand at projects that are big and yet still experimental. The only way to innovate is to have organizations that have the resources, yet are nimble enough to do something new.’

Yankovskaya’s commitment to fostering new talent extends beyond singers and conductors: at Chicago Opera Theater she has established the Vanguard Initiative, which offers emerging opera composers an immersive two-year residency. ‘They come to everything we do,’ she explains. ‘They sit through our staging rehearsals and think critically about every moment of what’s happening. They meet everyone who comes through the company. They sit in on our artistic planning meetings, they sit in on our

board meetings, they learn about how we do all of the things behind the scenes in marketing and on the financial side, and we study standard repertoire.'

Again, the synergy between the city's two companies is crucial. 'They also go to everything at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. And every month we sit down for several hours, and we dive deeply into more traditional operatic repertoire and talk about what works and what doesn't. At the end of that process I pair them with an established librettist and they write a chamber opera that we perform. And the goal is that by the end of all of these experiences, they will feel confident and comfortable, and they understand all of the things that go into writing opera.'

Just as vital is the workshopping process, which Chicago Opera Theater has the scope to provide in ways the Lyric may not. 'Verdi and Puccini and Donizetti, those composers had opportunities to try and try again, to fail even within specific pieces, then to do it again in a different city to rewrite it.' Now, she says, that's impossible 'especially at the big houses: usually the composers and librettists just have to write something and deliver it for rehearsal. And it can't work that way. Opera is too complicated, too big, too collaborative for it to work that way.'

For the sake of the art form, Yankovskaya hopes that English National Opera can continue to occupy its own current place in London's, and indeed the world's, operatic ecosystem. 'ENO in particular has been so key internationally to giving so many singers a platform to try something new, to get started, to make a name to show what they can do. And ultimately, even if the opera companies in smaller cities are doing exciting work, people unfortunately look for what's happening in the big city. That's our mentality. And if in the big city, the only thing that's happening is the standard work, and on that international level, it's really a killer.'

*Lidiya Yankovskaya conducts Isabella Bywater's staging of Górecki's 'Symphony of Sorrowful Songs', with the soprano Nicole Chevalier, opening on April 27.*

## OBITUARIES

### Henry Bacon

Finnish academic and critic, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on November 25, aged 64. For three decades this magazine's Helsinki correspondent, Bacon wrote extensively on opera but by profession was an academic working in film studies. Born in Helsinki on 4 December 1957, he undertook theatre studies at the University of Helsinki for his BA and PhD, completing the latter in 1994, the year he became an assistant professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of

Oulu. Between 1999 and 2004 he was a research fellow at the Finnish Film archive, and he brought Film and Television Studies to the University of Helsinki, becoming professor there in 2004. He published widely, and his monographs included *Luchino Visconti—Explorations of Beauty and Decay*. Among his research interests were film's relation to other arts. He contributed to these pages from 1991 onwards, and his last review—of Saariaho's *Innocence* at Finnish National Opera—appeared in the January issue (pp. 50-2).