

## JÉRÉMIE RHORER

George Loomis

Rhorer conducts a new 'Figaro' at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées this month



It has taken a few years, but the cycle of Mozart operas conducted by Jérémie Rhorer at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées is moving ahead again this month with a new instalment, *Le nozze di Figaro*. The production, by the American film director James Gray, will be the fifth of the series at the Parisian theatre, following stagings of *Idomeneo*, *Così fan tutte*, *La clemenza di Tito* and *Don Giovanni* that succeeded each other at the rate of roughly one a year until 2014. During the intervening five years Rhorer has been no stranger to the theatre in other repertoire and has burnished his growing reputation in other houses and concert halls.

Still, returning to the Champs-Élysées with Mozart brings Rhorer, 46, special pleasure, as he acknowledged during one of our conversations. He has now conducted *Figaro* at Aix and Glyndebourne but it was also the opera with which he made his debut at the Champs-Élysées, in 2007 in a concert performance that came after he had conducted the work (and *Idomeneo*) at the Beaune International Festival of Baroque Opera. Playing under his leadership then was Le Cercle de l'Harmonie, the period-instrument orchestra he founded with the violinist Julien Chauvin in 2005.

Le Cercle will be in the pit for the new *Figaro*, just as it was for the previous operas in the series. Over the years Rhorer and Le Cercle have developed sterling reputations for their work in Mozart and in later areas of the repertoire as well. Rhorer is a firm proponent of period instruments for Mozart, and he and the orchestra have built on the advantages of such instruments to offer performances with a high degree of precision and vitality. The orchestra's playing under Rhorer sparkles with energy and results they achieve have been increasingly recognized by the press. Reviewing *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* on Alpha Classics, Max Loppert (October 2016, p. 1330) pronounced Rhorer a 'rising star in the French musical firmament' and the recording 'a Mozart operatic interpretation of such dramatic vigour, such innate feeling for the work's inner richness of emotional life to balance the abundance of its musical invention, the dazzle of its brilliant instrumental apparel and high-wire *vocalità*, that each hearing brought me "the full *Entführung*", not just a collection of "*Entführung* moments". The tempos, predominantly forward-moving in period fashion, never prevent the music—and the singers, of course—from breathing; better still, there's overall a feeling of spontaneous responsiveness.'

At its founding, Le Cercle de l'Harmonie was intended to become something other than another French ensemble specializing in the Baroque, of which the country is blessed with so many. Rhorer's musical training and personal inclination led to something different. As a boy soprano he entered the Maîtrise (choir school) of Radio France, where he sang under such conductors as Colin Davis and Lorin Maazel and made the decision to become a conductor himself. While doing preparatory work at the Conservatoire National de Région de Paris prior to entering the Paris Conservatoire, Rhorer made the acquaintance of the Bulgarian conductor and Herbert von Karajan protégé Emil Tchakarov, and studied with him before Tchakarov's tragically early death in 1991. That same year he entered the Conservatoire, where he was influenced above all by the composer Thierry Escaich, with whom he studied composition, counterpoint, orchestration and analysis. A harpsichordist, Rhorer was deeply affected by the 'Baroque revolution', as engineered in particular by Nikolaus Harnoncourt. After graduating from the Conservatoire with four first prizes, he served as an assistant to the conductors William Christie and Marc Minkowski. Rather than Baroque repertoire, however, Le Cercle's mission from the beginning was to play music from the late 18th century onward.

'What I took from the Baroque revolution was its methodology, the exploration of sources that led to a better understanding of what composers wanted from performers. It is important to put the composer at the centre and fight traditions going against the musical text. As a conductor, I never wanted to play Baroque music—I wanted to apply the methodology of the Baroque revolution to later music.' And the later music Rhorer had in mind begins with Mozart. 'In my vision of music history there is no rupture between Classicism and Romanticism in either the symphonic or operatic realms. For the symphony, Mozart and Haydn lead directly to Brahms. In opera, Mozart and Gluck

■ *Mostly Mozart: Christophe Honoré's production of 'Così fan tutte' at Aix in 2016, which Jérémie Rhorer conducted*



lead directly to Wagner. It's very organic. A break only happens with Mahler and Strauss because of changing aesthetics.' Common to Rhorer's view of both realms, of course, is Mozart. 'Mozart is a world in himself. He opens all the doors to the 19th century—not just to Beethoven, but to Brahms and Wagner.'

Rhorer's music-making is highly informed historically, which gives it not only the stamp of authenticity but also an interpretative depth absent from readings by conductors less intellectually curious. His historical leanings help to explain his choice of works by certain important but lesser-known composers for performance. Johann Christian Bach, for instance, is generally acknowledged to have been a huge influence on Mozart during his formative years. Rhorer and Le Cercle collaborated with Philippe Jaroussky on the singer's J.C. Bach disc for Virgin Classics and were also part of a significant revival of *Amadis de Gaule*, J.C.'s only opera for Paris, at the Royal Opera of Versailles in 2011. 'Mozart had great respect for Johann Christian Bach as a person and a musician. I believe *Amadis de Gaule* was a model for *Idomeneo*.'

One reason Rhorer was tempted to conduct Grétry's *L'Amant jaloux*, at Versailles and the Opéra Comique, is that it contains a comic scene much like the one involving Susanna in the Act 2 finale of *Le nozze di Figaro*. 'I think Mozart liked Grétry's scene and asked Da Ponte to include one like it in *Figaro*.' Or take Gaspare Spontini. Rhorer was attracted to this composer because of references to him in Berlioz's *Grand Traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes*. 'He is the crucial link between Beethoven/Weber and Berlioz/Wagner and was much admired by Wagner. His operas show an important relationship between his gift for orchestration and dramaturgical expression.' At the Champs-Élysées Rhorer conducted *La Vestale* in a 2013 production of the original French version. He also conducted another French opera by Spontini, *Olimpie*, in a 2016 concert performance recorded and released earlier this year by Palazzetto Bru Zane.

Rhorer has, of course, conducted many better-known operas, often at the Champs-Élysées. Indeed, one reason for the five-year gap there between *Don Giovanni* and the new *Figaro* is that Michel Franck, the general and artistic director, gave him a chance to hone his profile as a conductor of diverse new repertoire. In addition to *Olimpie*, he conducted Olivier Py's admired production of *Dialogues des Carmélites*, with the Philharmonia Orchestra; ventured into bel canto repertoire with a new *Barbiere di Siviglia* staged by Laurent Pelly; conducted his first Strauss opera, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, in Katie Mitchell's production from Aix, with the Chamber Orchestra of Paris; and presided over a period-instrument *Traviata* staged by Deborah Warner that proved revelatory in its relationship between singers and orchestra.

Of Rhorer's association with the Champs-Élysées, Franck wrote in an email: 'My collaboration with Jérémie Rhorer began in 2007 with a concert version of *Le nozze di Figaro*. His reading of the work was very interesting and revealed a real artistic vision. This led me to offer him several operas in different types of repertoire. More than ten years later, this new production of *Figaro* will allow him to give an interpretation enriched by all his experience.' Needless to say, Rhorer is grateful to have developed Franck's trust. 'It is a gift to me, and an honour to work in this beautiful and historically important theatre.'

The choice of James Gray to direct the production originated as a casual suggestion by Rhorer to Franck, not knowing whether the idea was feasible. 'I am a big movie fan', said Rhorer, who at one point had the idea of working with Woody Allen, 'and I love Gray's work. It is clear from his films he has an interest in music but I had no idea if he



■ 'La traviata' on period instruments: Deborah Warner's staging in Paris last winter

wanted to direct an opera.' Yet details fell into place, and with *Figaro* the director of *Little Odessa*, *The Yards* and *The Lost City of Z* will make his operatic debut. Gray's sober, thoughtfully conceived films about fraught societal and familial relationships 'are filled with grand gestures and operatic emotions', the *New York Times* has said. In a conversation over dinner about music and movies, Gray impressed Rhorer with his broad knowledge of music. 'He has a real taste for Verdi and Puccini, and I was surprised by how precisely he knows the music of Steve Reich.'

Among Gray's films, Rhorer mentioned Gray's characterization of Nina Fawcett, the strong, independent female protagonist of *The Lost City of Z*, as boding well for Gray's treatment of Mozart's feminine characters. Like Mozart's Countess, Nina feels bereft of her husband's companionship, though for different reasons, and suffers from unrealized aspirations. Rhorer sees the Countess's suffering as a metaphor for Mozart's own disappointments in his volatile career. Rhorer said Gray has approached *Figaro* 'in a classic way, with 18th-century costumes', adding that a production sketch reminded him of a Jean-Pierre Ponnelle production. Not surprisingly, Rhorer feels most comfortable working with directors who have, as he does, a fundamental respect for the composer. This he had with Stéphane Braunschweig, with whom he collaborated on two of the Champs-Élysées Mozart productions. 'He was never arbitrary and achieved verisimilitude with very precise detail work.' Rhorer also has good things to say about Olivier Py.

On the other hand, Rhorer thought about pulling out of Martin Kušej's 2015 production of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at Aix-en-Provence, which he said 'was all about Kušej' and 'expropriated Mozart's music' for a sensationalized scenario about terrorism and violence. 'There is not much a conductor can do in this situation', he added. 'If he walks out he will be thought of as either someone who is difficult to work with or a reactionary.' And although her production turned out well, he had difficulties with Deborah Warner over the question of cuts in the period-instrument *Traviata*. 'Stage directors wonder why the same words appear two times and don't always appreciate what the music brings to the words, situations and emotions.' In the event, the only cut observed was of the repeat of the baritone's cabaletta.



■ Jérémie Rhorer

Another important assignment was the premiere of the opera *Claude* by Escaich, his former teacher at the Conservatoire, at the Lyon Opera in 2013, which Rhorer conducted. Based on a short story by Victor Hugo about a victim of injustice who prefigures the writer's Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, the opera won praise for its colourful and dramatically potent score. Rhorer makes no secret of his enormous admiration for Escaich, not least for the courage he showed in daring to write music with a harmonic orientation at a time when it was de rigueur for composers to toe the modernist line as

espoused by Pierre Boulez. 'Harmonic style is the most important thing for composers', said Rhorer. 'The ones who endure—Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Wagner, Tchaikovsky; in France, Ravel, Dutilleul, Messiaen—were the ones who really mastered it. The core of the post-World War II repertoire killed it off and we need to restore it. Even Thierry could do more, although he explains, of course, that his cluster-like 11th chords have tonal roots. Sometimes I think when he composes he imagines Boulez looking over his shoulder.'

Escaich's music, highly inventive and often hyperactive, could give an indication of what Rhorer's own music sounds like. So far, we haven't had a chance to sample a lot of it but that will change. He is currently working, with the librettists Jan Sobrie and Fabienne Vegt, on an opera for a major European opera house. 'Arrangements haven't been finalized yet, but I have been given the green light.' Its subject, which could hardly be more different from that of *Claude*, comes from a Hans Christian Andersen story, *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*, about a toy soldier who falls in love with a paper ballerina. The music, Rhorer said, will include a song in pop style for the birthday party of the boy who receives the soldier as a gift.

Just how much of his future calendar will be devoted to composition remains to be seen, but much beckons as a conductor. When we spoke in early September he was about to conduct Schumann's secular oratorio *Das Paradies und die Peri* with Le Cercle at the Beethoven Festival in Bonn before heading to Rome for rehearsals on another new Mozart production—*Don Giovanni*, in a staging by Graham Vick at the Teatro dell'Opera. Rhorer's preliminary comment about the production, which he said was Vick's fifth or sixth of the opera, was that it avoids clichés (such as having Giovanni snort cocaine) in favour of addressing human concerns, and doesn't render judgement or consign the protagonist to damnation. Although Rhorer has previously favoured (rightly, in my view) the traditional conflation of Prague and Vienna versions, even including the Zerlina-Leporello duet in his recording for Alpha, this time he has deferred to Vick's choice of the Prague version. The Rome Opera orchestra's participation means modern instruments, but Rhorer looks forward to working with the players, having heard good reports about the orchestra after its years of playing for Riccardo Muti.

Forthcoming engagements for Rhorer include a return to North America for concerts with the Montreal Symphony. With Le Cercle he will perform Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* in various locations. He is especially excited about a multi-concert Tchaikovsky

retrospective planned with the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie in Bremen; the programme is still being finalized but will include all the symphonies. Opera projects include a double bill of Poulenc's *La Voix humaine* and a new one-act opera by Escaich, an evening that will surely supply yet another good reason for a visit to the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

## Readers' letters

### Tickets, please

I read with dismay the news that ENO is removing the second ticket from critics. I do not criticize the intention to offer review tickets to a broader section of the public. During my many years as ENO's Head of Press I had control of the complimentary press ticket allocations and regularly allocated a pair of best tickets to representatives of student papers to encourage them (despite the fact that a review would not appear during the actual production run) and did the same when approached by online reviewers, in both cases in order to reach wider audiences. The Coliseum auditorium is large enough to accommodate this without removing the second ticket from critics.

Critics attend performances in unsocial hours and removing their guest tickets feels punitive. While there is value in nurturing in aspiring writers a discerning approach, the idea that only they can respond 'emotionally' is strange. Surely a review from our opera critics who are passionate about the genre embodies not only a personal emotional response but an appraisal of how well the performance succeeds in engaging and uplifting the audience as well. In my view this complements the important traditional role of the critic in assessing and helping to maintain the professional standards of which the UK can be so proud.

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### Remembering Rae

The late Rae Woodland [see Obituary, March 2014, p. 297] left a bequest to the Royal Academy of Music in London, where she spent some time as a teacher

after her busy international career.

The Academy has picked Henry Wood's 150-year celebrations to mark her legacy ('Sir Henry Wood at 150: Wood and the Voice', at the Angela Burgess Hall, Monday November 18, 6pm). Wood was a great champion of vocal music, taught singing, and even wrote a singing manual, despite being no singer himself.

Rae Woodland, according to Michael Head, had the best technique he ever heard. She learnt from her teacher, Roy Henderson, the old principles of bel canto: invisible technique at the service of art. Rae also held forthright views on teaching.

This promises to be an interesting discussion between Professors Raymond Holden and Mark Wildman. I hope some of Rae's former pupils, colleagues and admirers will be able to enjoy the event.  
Dr Gillian Horrocks  
Aldeburgh, Suffolk

### Leaving out Longborough

I have no intention of adding to the well-directed correspondence broadside (October, pp. 1230-6) against Alan Davey's loquacious and self-laudatory response (September, pp. 1092-4) to your justified criticism in August.

However, it is noticeable that the BBC has virtually ignored the remarkable and innovative Longborough Festival led by its music director Anthony Negus, one of the most distinguished Wagnerians of our day. There has been little mention of his achievements, let alone a broadcast of a performance. Sadly, like Reginald Goodall, a wider audience may only be made aware of Negus and of Longborough late in the day.  
Richard France  
Yateley, Hampshire