

## Glyndebourne on Tour

Lizzie the assistant in the Glyndebourne shop sang the opening bars of the Sandman aria when I told her I wasn't familiar with Humperdink's Hansel & Gretel. I was buying the CD before a performance of this opera. Lizzie went on to tell us that she'd heard L'Elisir d'Amore last evening, one of the other two operas on the Glyndebourne Tour this year, and the tenor was the best ever. This visit to Sussex was prompted by a notice from the Third Age Trust advertising this performance, prior to which U3A members were invited to attend a talk on the history of Glyndebourne given by the company archivist, Julia Aries. She told us that the first opera house on this site was built by John Christie, a retired Eton schoolmaster and opera buff, together with his soprano wife. They built it in their back garden, which is actually more of an estate. It opened with The Marriage of Figaro in 1934. Eighty years on, the annual festival is still going strong, and it's what Glyndebourne is most famous for. Lots of posh people in long dresses and dinner suits come in the summer months to watch and listen to an opera, and to picnic on sunny lawns and drink champagne during the one and a half hour interval. I wonder what happens when it rains?

The Glyndebourne Tour however, is a separate operation and was established in 1968 to give some of the best young singers the opportunity to take leading roles in major performances, and to take these Glyndebourne productions to other parts of the UK. The tour, for which the dress code is more relaxed, starts at Glyndebourne in October, before heading out to visit six locations over six weeks, performing the same three operas at each venue. I was surprised to discover that the most northerly venue this year is Stoke on Trent, and wondered why Glyndebourne isn't going to the North of England. I can't believe there's no demand in Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle. I still remember my first opera, Cosi Fan Tutte at the Theatre Royal in Newcastle in 1962. I hope there are opportunities in Northumbria for today's youngsters to take a break from One Direction and hear something different.

We walked around the lovely grounds before the 4 o'clock performance and noted several small groups with plastic bags, bottles and thermos flasks taking advantage of the good October weather. Following recent rain however, the ground underfoot on the lawns was a little soggy so we stuck mainly to the paved areas in the formal gardens. The present brick built opera house was opened in 1994 to modern day standards and it's the sort of theatre I like. It has plenty of room to move around, three restaurants on site, a long bar with sufficient serving staff, and 1,200 comfortable seats in the auditorium.

I wouldn't presume to offer any criticism of the performance, I enjoyed it very much. I thought all who took part, singers, musicians and the children were outstanding. The set in Act 3, the witch's cottage, is surprising and astonishing. It complements the story so well. I didn't recognise any of the music and didn't come away humming the tunes, but no doubt this will follow when I've listened to the CD a couple of times.

We had a great day out prompted entirely by the U3A, so thanks to those at HQ who set it up. We heard there may be future U3A collaborations with Glyndebourne. If one of these involved the summer festival I may be tempted to send my DJ to the cleaners, search out my bow tie and journey again to Sussex, this time with a picnic hamper and bottle of fizz. But meanwhile perhaps we'll venture to Milton Keynes in November to hear Lizzie's best ever tenor in The Elixir of Love.

Max Black