



An interview with Tobias Ringborg

I arrive at the Jerwood Space, where rehearsals are underway for Garsington Opera's forthcoming production of *Idomeneo*, to find that the afternoon rehearsal has finished a little early.

'Things must be going well,' I remark to Tobias Ringborg, and the Swedish conductor confirms that the cast and creative team are greatly enjoying the excitement and intensity of these initial rehearsals. There is, however, an enormous amount to take in during the limited preparation time available, and that day he'd judged that the singers needed to pause, absorb and reflect on the day's work. Director Tim Albery, with whom Ringborg worked on Opera North's production of Verdi's *Macbeth* in 2014, pushes every one hard; his direction is incredibly detailed and he takes trouble with every single word — what it means, what it infers, how it should be delivered.

The rehearsal studio contains a model of Hannah Clark's design — though Ringborg didn't let slip any clues — and Clark and Albery have been visiting Garsington/Wormsley to see the set constructed on site. It will be Ringborg's début in architect Robin Snell's award-winning Pavilion at the Wormsley Estate, though he enjoyed the 2014 production of *Fidelio* as an audience member and is looking forward to the exploring the venue's potential and its challenges.

It must help that for Ringborg *Idomeneo* truly is 'in the blood'. He is returning to the work for the third time, having conducted the opera in Malmö in 2012 and before that for Danish National Opera in 2010, where he led 25 performances with 5 different orchestras —sometimes presenting an evening performance with one orchestra, having been rehearsing with another during the day! But, each production brings fresh ideas and insights, he explains, as one sees new things in the score and hears new things in singers' interpretations. Ringborg finds *Idomeneo* a very 'modern' work, whose harmonic ambiguity is present right from the overture. Indeed, in his *Cambridge Opera Handbook* on the work, Julian Rushton commented that 'part of the abiding fascination with *Idomeneo* is the tension between conventional forms and a radical form of continuity'.

Ringborg has a terrific cast to work with. Toby Spence is making his Garsington Opera début in the title role, alongside Caitlin Hulcup — who was Ringborg's Dorabella in *Così fan tutte* at Scottish Opera in 2009 — and Louise Alder who makes début with Garsington Opera as Ilia, following her highly regarded ROH début as Euridice in Keith Warner's production of Luigi Rossi's *Orpheus* at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse earlier this season.

While he is an experienced Mozartian, Ringborg explains that his heart really lies in nineteenth-century Italy, in the 'big' Romantic works of Verdi and Puccini. The latter, in particular, gets straight to the soul, bypassing 'thought' and touching the essence of human emotion and feeling.

In fact, Ringborg began his professional career as a violinist and still performs as a soloist and chamber musician — although he admits that an international opera schedule does not facilitate a regular practice routine. Having begun learning the instrument at the age of three, in 1994 he won the prestigious Swedish *Soloist Prize* and graduated from the Royal College of Music in Stockholm, before moving to New York where he spent two years studying at the Juilliard School. While his career as a professional violinist began successfully, Ringborg later reflected on where his musical passions were taking him and took a diversion from the concert hall to the opera house.

I ask if he had always had a yearning to be a conductor and he replies that, while he had no conscious plan to pick up the baton, a subconscious desire may well have been present. He remembers a performance of *Tosca* when he was ten-years-old which left him transfixed and which sowed the seeds of a life-long fascination

with the music of Puccini. He still owns the copy of the score of *Tosca* over which he obsessively poured — he wonders why a young boy who knew nothing of love, hatred, torture should be so overwhelmed by Puccini's opera? — and has memories of his younger self listening to other operas, score perched on a music stand as he conducted along to the music flowing through the headphones.

Success as a conductor came swiftly. Having participated in a masterclass, he quickly found himself winning a conducting competition in Helsingborg in 2000, and the following year made his operatic debut at the Stockholm Folkoperan with Verdi's *La traviata*, and at the Royal Swedish Opera with Puccini's *La Bohème*. A two-year association with Malmö Opera followed, leading to performances of diverse repertoire including Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* and Verdi's *Otello*.

Ringborg reflects that he was fortunate in the early stages of his conducting career to do school and youth concerts — educational programmes are an essential part of Swedish institutional music-making — which offered the opportunity to perform wide-ranging repertoire and to re-visit and repeat works many times. He might find himself conducting the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony ten times in a week — where else would one get that chance?

The aforementioned *Così* in Scotland marked his first performance in the UK and he returned to Scotland for *Rigoletto* in 2011 and *Il Trovatore* in 2015, while at Opera North he has since conducted *La Bohème*, *Don Giovanni*, Verdi's *Macbeth* (with Albery) and, most recently, Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*.

I ask what works are top of his wish-list. Inevitably, Puccini looms large: Ringborg would really like to tackle *Il Trittico*, having previously conducted *Il Tabarro* (along with Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*). Does any less familiar repertoire tempt him? After all, it was Ringborg who rescued the Italian/Swedish composer Jacopo Foroni's 1849 *bel canto* masterpiece, *Cristina, Regina di Svezia*, from obscurity when he conducted the opera at the 2007 Vadstena Summer Opera Festival, subsequently making the world premiere recording of the work with Gothenburg Opera in 2010 ([Cristina](#)). I recall the Wexford Festival Opera production of 2013 ([Wexford 2013](#)) and Ringborg is full of enthusiasm for Foroni who, he is certain, would surely have rivalled the 'greats' of Italian Romantic Opera had not revolutionary events in 1848 led him to leave his native land for more northern climes — 'At that time Sweden was like the North Pole!' exclaims Ringborg.

He would also love to conduct Tchaikovsky's *The Maid of Orleans*, with its fantastic role for the eponymous mezzo soprano, and, venturing into the twentieth century, *Wozzeck* and *Peter Grimes* both appeal.

But, first there is more Mozart and Italian repertoire. Just days after the close of Garsington's *Idomeneo* run, Ringborg will find himself back at Danish National Opera rehearsing Bellini's last opera, *I Puritani*, with director Annilese Miskimmon — and he notes that it was interesting to hear the composer's *first* opera when *Opera Rara* gave a concert performance of *Adelson e Salvini* at the Barbican Hall earlier this month ([Adelson e Salvini](#)). Despite the 'weaknesses' of the student score, one could hear where things began and where Bellini was heading. Then, in October, Ringborg returns to Scottish Opera for a revival of Sir Thomas Allen's much-loved production of *The Marriage of Figaro*.

When Ringborg conducted *Il trovatore* at Scottish Opera in 2015 the critical press was eulogistic, praising the 'near-perfect balance between pit and stage' (*Herald*), 'razor-sharp rhythms and ominous bass lines ... true Verdian music-making' (*The Times*), and the 'clarity of texture and energised, but disciplined, pacing' (*The Scotsman*). *The Stage* reviewer declared that much of the credit for the 'taut music-making and unstoppable dramatic momentum ... goes to Swedish conductor Tobias Ringborg, who pushes the score along as if he had real fire and brimstone in his veins'. This energy and passion is evident throughout our conversation: despite the day's strenuous and demanding rehearsal, Ringborg is animated, intent and lively company.

No doubt he will bring this characteristic vigour to *Idomeneo*, which opens at Garsington on 19 June and continues in repertory until 11 July.

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