

HAYDN SEEK

GYÖRGY VASHEGYI TALKS TO BRIAN ROBINS

The first impression one has on meeting the Hungarian conductor György Vashegyi is one of easy affability, even of a somewhat avuncular figure. It's a deceptive image. For 30 years Vashegyi has been one of the most active musicians working in Hungary, not only in the operatic and orchestral mainstream but also in the field of early music with the Purcell Choir, which he founded in 1990 for a concert performance of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, and the Orfeo Orchestra, inaugurated the following year. In 2000 the orchestra gave the first period-instrument performance at the Hungarian State Opera in Budapest, a production of Haydn's *L'infedeltà delusa*. The same opera was chosen to inaugurate a series of Haydn operas at the recently established Haydneum Festival at Eszterháza, the beautifully refurbished palace of the Esterházy family. Haydneum, founded at Eszterháza in 2021 as a centre for the study and propagation of early music along the lines of the Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles, adds yet another string to the bow of Vashegyi and his choir and orchestra, who are resident performers. Over a lunch held for visiting journalists during the second edition of Haydneum, Vashegyi had demonstrated scholarly enthusiasm for the venture. 'People have the perception that nothing happened musically at Eszterháza before Haydn, but it is absolutely not true. His predecessor Gregor Joseph Werner was a great composer in the Baroque style, a contemporary of Bach who composed in the Viennese Baroque style of Fux. There are 340 volumes of compositions by Werner in the state library in Budapest and in Hungary we also have the biggest collection of Haydn autographs anywhere.'

Later we walked back to the palace, where Vashegyi had found a charming room for us to settle down to our discussion. We started by talking about *L'isola disabitata*,

Haydn central: Eszterháza palace



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the Haydn opera performed the previous evening in the spectacular surroundings of the palace's Apollo Room. 'Haydn always admitted that his operas, with the exception of the very last one, which was written for London, were written for special circumstances and a special location, the opera house at Eszterháza,' Vashegyi explains. '*L'isola disabitata* dates from autumn 1779. The original opera house burned down just

a couple of weeks before the opera was due to be given, so Haydn had to present it in a concert version in the marionette theatre at Eszterháza. Within Haydn's output it is a revolutionary opera. For a start, it's the shortest—it can be fitted onto one CD—and you need only four singers, no choir and a small orchestra. By the way, the choir here was not very bright; there were no official singers, so you might have got the servants to sing, "Evviva!", but not I think swinging fugues! It is the only full Metastasio opera set by Haydn. There is only one ensemble and all the recitative is composed in *accompagnato* style. It includes much lovely music and for Haydn was not without personal attachment in the form of Luigia Polzelli, the young, probably beautiful soprano who was Haydn's mistress and who sang the role of Silvia. We have been doing it with my Orfeo Orchestra for 20 years, so it was a special occasion for us to open this second Haydneum with it.' Has 2025's opera been decided upon yet? 'Probably *La vera costanza*. It is also worth mentioning that we are thinking of launching a full-scale project to record all Haydn's operas, which will be over a 15-year period. They deserve to be better known.'

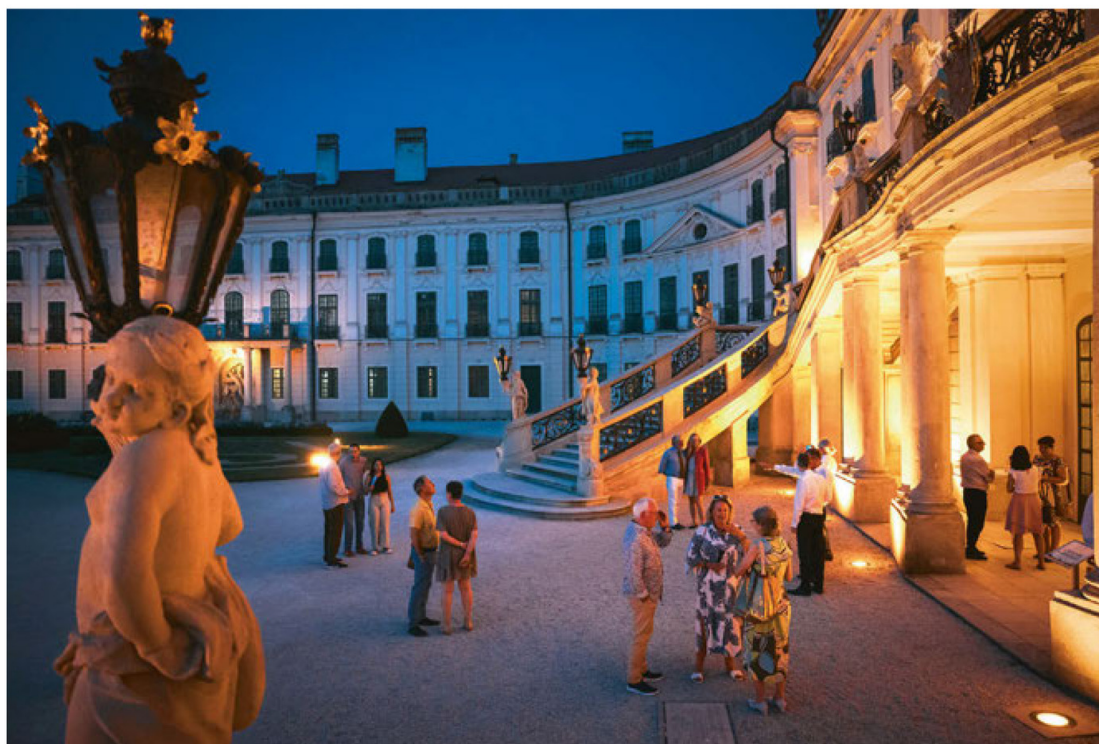
Among operatic record collectors Vashegyi is most associated with the French Baroque repertoire, of which he has recorded an astonishing amount. What first drew him to this repertoire, one rarely undertaken in a major way by non-French conductors? 'Well, I think we have to recognize that two of the leading pioneers in the field, John Eliot Gardiner and William Christie, were not Frenchmen. So that was an Englishman and an American who fell in love with French culture. I was very lucky because I grew up in the '70s with German culture centred on Bach and then thanks to Gardiner and Christie fell in love with Rameau at the age of 23.' What was it about the music that drew him to it? 'I think it was the infinite beauty of Rameau and the infinite power. If you know the second act of *Castor et Pollux*, in the *divertissement* Pollux's father Jupiter shows him the endless pleasures of life he will lose if he exchanges places with his brother Castor in Hades. "Connaissez notre puissance, jeune immortel, où courez vous?" ['Know our power, young immortal,

where do you hasten?’], sing the followers of Hebe, and at that point it is Rameau himself who is speaking: “You must know my power, my infinite power is addressing you.” This infinite power is in the music and the beauty of that music. And because of that French alexandrine and this irregularity of French poetry compared to German or other languages, you cannot anticipate the end of that musical phrase in advance. Rameau is leading you on a mysterious journey with each phrase and you do not know when it will finish. The beauty of Rameau is infinite; once encountered you cannot live without it!’

In French Baroque opera there are often different versions of the most successful operas, which were frequently revived with alterations and sometimes new music. What guides Vashegyi’s choice in such cases? ‘If we are recording one of these masterpieces we try to find a version that has some unrecorded music, because every note of Rameau should be accessible. In the case of *Dardanus*, which we recorded for Glossa in 2020, it was even more important because in the second 1744 version there were about 40 minutes of extraordinarily beautiful music never played or recorded. Conductors often try to put different versions together, but with *Dardanus* that is impossible. You have to choose.’

One of the more remarkable things about Vashegyi’s concentration on French Baroque opera is that it has not by any means been confined to Rameau and the better-known operas of his contemporaries. Among the many operas not previously recorded, Jean-Baptiste Stuck’s *Polydore* is an excellent example of a revelatory discovery that intriguingly includes elements of both French and Italian opera. ‘Yes, he was born in Livorno and as far as I know is perhaps the only person to write *opera seria* in Italy and

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tragédie lyrique in Paris. We chose this piece because we wanted to remember the Regency period in France [1715-23]. Stuck was one of the most important Regency composers between the death of Louis XIV and the start of the reign of Louis XV. The Regent, Philippe d'Orléans, was even more mad about music than Louis XIV; his music master was Charpentier, then Charles-Hubert Gervais, who is another very important composer for me. I'm very proud that we have recorded his *Hypermnestre* because after Rameau and Leclair, Gervais is probably my favourite composer of the French Baroque.' I tell Vashegyi that my favourite French opera after Rameau is probably Leclair's *Scylla et Glaucus*, another opera that he has recorded. How would he rate it? 'Well, I could quote Nicholas McGegan, who said, "I love everything by Rameau and *Scylla et Glaucus*!"' So it's a case of Rameau or Rameau plus; I suggest Rameau plus must also mean Lully. 'Lully, I think, is more linked to French theatre and for that reason we haven't yet produced a full Lully opera in Hungary. In 2026 we will try to do a new *Armide*, but it will be the version of the last revival for the Paris Opéra in 1761. By the way, another unknown opera will shortly be issued by Glossa. It was recorded some years ago but is only now being released. This is *Omphale* by Jean-Baptiste Cardonne [1769], who worked more or less in the style of Gluck, but is much better than Gluck, I think. It is amazing. At the end there is a love duet that goes from Lully to Berlioz in the course of one piece! So this is quite something, for me underlining the very long period of continuity achieved by the Paris Opéra, now something like 350 years. This continuity was never broken, so it exists from Louis XIV up to yesterday.'



It is an interesting fact that much of Vashegyi's operatic work is devoted to concert performances, leaving one to wonder about his attitude to present-day staging, particularly of Baroque works. 'You know in Hungary we have one state opera company, a big institution. I'm very grateful to it because I've conducted hundreds of stage performances there. I've done all the Mozarts, I do Verdi and so on, and even a little Baroque work. It was marvellous to learn to conduct there, for example. But it is extremely centralized and after 25 seasons there for the first time this year I did not have an invitation from the State Opera. I accept their decision. Operatic music is very important to me and I'd love to conduct more stage performances if I have a good, properly chosen cast, well prepared musically, and a stage production that doesn't make it

impossible to make high-quality music. All of this one would like to have at the State Opera; at the moment we don't. It is not a coincidence that in the past ten years I have recorded 19 French operas and during that time only one was a staged production, and that not in the opera house.' So is it that he considers it hard to find the right opera directors to work with? 'The right opera director understands the musical language of a great opera composer and any opera



Applause at Eszterháza for György Vashegyi and soloists

composer worthy of the name has already determined a good part of the staging by composing the score. You have to understand that the language of music depicts very clearly what is happening to the characters on the stage and the problem is directors who don't understand music and in extreme cases don't even like music. So I don't want to do productions with which I don't agree.'

What ambitions remain for Vashegyi? 'To find as much unknown good music as possible and perform it well. And to work with singers. I'm in love with singers—my wife Katalin Szutréry is a soprano—and I could not live without the human voice. So I am always very happy to work with extraordinary singers such as Cyrille Dubois and Véronique Gens.' It seems apt to conclude with the words of Kodály quoted by Vashegyi at the end of an article he wrote for the lavishly produced handbook to Haydneum, words that might well articulate his own philosophy: 'Our age of mechanization leads along a road ending with man himself a machine; only the spirit of singing can save us from this fate.'

György Vashegyi conducts the Purcell Choir and Danubia Orchestra in a concert performance of Michael Haydn's 'Andromeda e Perseo' at the Grand Hall of the Liszt Academy in Budapest on March 22. See www.haydneum.com for further details.

READERS' LETTERS

Offenbach's intentions

The review of the new recording of *La Vie parisienne* (February, pp. 283-4) prompts me to point out that

Jean-Christophe Keck, who has probably forgotten more about Offenbach than most of us will know, has raised many objections to the score used on these CDs

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