

Operas by John Adams and André Previn receive their UK premieres in semi-staged performances at the Barbican this month. **Nina Large** sets the scene

American accents



Dark corners: *El Niño*

'This is an amazingly good time for the creation of operas in the States. There's never been a time, to my mind, when companies were commissioning more operas,' says American composer John Adams. The evidence is clear enough – San Francisco has commissioned the latest Adams opera *Doctor Atomic*, inspired by the life of Robert Oppenheimer, Houston has just premiered Rachel Portman's *The Little Prince*, Los Angeles Opera will premiere Deborah Drattell's *Nicholas and Alexandra*, the Met has a new work coming up by Tan Dun and Chicago's Lyric Opera has lined up William Bolcom's *A Wedding*. No better time then for the Barbican's own celebration with its American Opera Week running from 25 to 28 June at which it will present the UK premieres

of Adams's *El Niño* and André Previn's *A Streetcar named Desire*.

'There is far greater support for American composers and American opera these days,' says Robert van Leer, head of music at the Barbican. 'Despite some of the negative news, opera is a growth area – we know from the statistics that there are more operas being performed year in year out. It's good to see it not only in more performances of *Rigoletto* and *Bohème* but also in the commissioning of new works.' The idea for the Barbican week rather presented itself: Van Leer knew that the LSO was already working on staging *Streetcar* with Renée Fleming and with the Barbican being co-commissioner of Adams's *El Niño* it gave him the perfect opportunity to programme both operas 'in a way that sometimes doesn't get that level of profile'.

El Niño (Spanish for 'The Child') is Adams's exploration of the mystery surrounding birth, and more specifically the birth of Jesus Christ. At its premiere it was fully staged as a multi-disciplinary work (directed by Peter Sellars) with all the singers acting on stage, dancers, film, and a children's chorus, but right from the start Adams was keen for the

work to have a life as a pure concert work as well. Indeed the manner in which the singers share the story between them, without being constrained by one particular role, is similar to oratorio. Willard White (bass-baritone) sings Joseph and the storyteller, Dawn Upshaw (soprano) and Kirsti Harms (mezzo-soprano) share various roles including Mary and both the London Voices and Theatre of Voices make up the chorus. Adams himself will conduct the cast including the BBC Symphony Orchestra for both performances.

Each of the six presentations since *El Niño's* premiere in 1999 has been tailored to its performance space. At the Barbican the chorus will remain on stage at all times. Van Leer explains: 'Peter has envisaged the stage as an altarpiece, with the chorus standing in front of the raised platform where the performers are so that you see them from the waist up as part of the tableau, and the film above the soloists.'

When we meet at a Dominican Republic Café in New York, Adams tells me that of all the Christian stories it was the nativity which he most strongly identified with as a child. 'I was always drawn to medieval and renaissance paintings of the Madonna, particularly Giotto. It's a beautiful story with dark corners as well as light.'

As befits a present day interpretation Adams sets the story in a modern context, putting fresh emphasis on the female perspective of childbirth, laid bare in all its misery and pain, happiness and wonder. This is represented in particular by the writings of two Mexican women; 17th-century nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the 20th-century novelist Rosario Castellanos. Work by Hildegard von Bingen is also presented, as are the more usual versions of the nativity from the gospels of Matthew and Luke, anonymous verses (the work begins with 'I sing of a Maiden'), and passages from the New Testament Apocrypha and the Wakefield Mystery Plays.

Music and text are further enriched through dance and film so that the 'sung' Mary shares the stage with dancer incarnations of Mary, the film all the while portraying yet another layer to the character. There is no end to the visual and aural stimuli – such abundance has been regarded alternately as both *El Niño's* triumph and failing.

It was Peter Sellars who discovered the Hispanic texts and Adams was determined not to translate them – instead he decided to learn Spanish himself. The satisfaction is still in evidence and I find myself infected by Adams's enthusiasm as he asks the waitress for coffee and rum cake in elementary but delighted Spanish. It is a reflection of his evident appreciation of cultural diversity, and all that comes with it. 'You and I in London and San Francisco, and here in New York, we can go at arm's length from these people and what makes their lives interesting, or we can open up to them. I think it's American culture's openness to influences which keeps it alive, and I think that's what makes European avant-garde culture so dead on arrival,' he says frankly.

In fact as we talk further Adams admits that he sees the European scene as bearing the 'last vestiges of 19th-century individualism and egotism' which has informed so much art in the past 150 years. 'There is often a terrible egotism, which says 'this is my work, it's about me and if you can't understand it or you don't like it you will feel inadequate. I think the avant-garde has completely lost sight of the pleasure principle. With *El Niño* I wanted simplicity and directness. I wanted to create a piece that didn't have any "attitude" as such.' Throughout the

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work almost every word is clearly audible, which enhances the candour of the texts and lends the work an almost Handelian directness.

As one of America's most versatile musicians André Previn achieves his goal in very different style from Adams. 'These operas come from very different vantage points,' says van Leer, 'and because they are approaching opera in such different ways I think they create a lot of talking points.' The chief difference is that where Adams took a basic idea and allowed himself free rein to express it, Previn has taken a pre-existing text, in this case Tennessee Williams's Pulitzer prize-winning *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and transformed it from play into opera. 'I think this is very clear in the scores. It embodies what John and André are about as individuals – and yet they are both still very strong American operas.'

A Streetcar Named Desire involves a glut of musical idioms. The overlay of jazz, pop and blues (so dominant in Previn's early career) with lush lyricism has encouraged the work to be described both as 'popular American music drama' (*The Wall Street Journal*) and 'the most riveting of contemporary operas' (*San Jose Mercury News*). Its popular appeal led to a screening on the American public television station PBS and when Deutsche Grammophon released its recording the disc won a Grand Prix du Disque.

'I think we are seeing a move away from a confrontational modernist edge towards work which both the companies and the public perhaps feel more comfortable with,' van Leer suggests. 'I think the public was really afraid of new opera; they thought they were going to be forced to sit through something which didn't have a storyline they could follow but they are now having positive new experiences with modern opera which has created the right environment for more commissions.' Previn is currently putting the finishing touches to his second opera, based on the Alessandro Baricco novel *Silk*.

It was San Francisco Opera general director Lotfi Mansouri who asked Previn whether he would be interested making *Streetcar* into his first opera in

1998. As Previn recalls, 'The idea of writing an opera is irresistible to anyone who composes; everyone of us secretly wants to create one. Williams's play is intensely operatic, poetic and beautiful. There was no way I was going to say no.' In an interview with *Musical America* he explained his feelings further: 'I had always regarded it as an opera with missing music, because the situations are so emotionally potent they quite naturally beg to be expressed in song.'

Renée Fleming played Blanche Dubois in the original staging for San Francisco Opera. Previn has written rather a lot for Fleming over the years, including three settings of poems by Emily Dickinson and *The Giraffes Go to Hamburg* (a setting of several lines from Karen Blixen's novel *Out of Africa*). At the Barbican he will direct his old friends the LSO alongside the original cast including Rodney Gilfry as Stanley Kowalski, Janice Watson as Stella Kowalski, and Anthony Dean Griffey as Harold Mitchell. Previn's association with the orchestra spans more than 35 years and his roles have included principal conductor (for more than 11 years), conductor emeritus and the specially created current position of conductor laureate. 'My relationship with the orchestra is very close,' he says. 'A few of the players go back to the period when I was principal conductor; coming back is always a great reunion.'

It is perhaps surprising that the UK premieres of these works should take place at the Barbican concert hall rather than in an opera house. 'I think there is a slight reticence on behalf of the major houses to engage in some of this work,' suggests van Leer. 'The Coliseum did Adams's *Nixon in China* to great acclaim a couple of years back but even that took almost 20 years before it crossed the ocean and found a home on a British stage.'

The current troubles of the ENO are certainly no help (indeed they were going to partner Chicago and San Francisco Operas in commissioning Adams's forthcoming *Doctor Atomic* but Adams told me they had backed out) and van Leer is well aware that putting opera on at the Barbican is possible 'without having to take the level of risk that the big houses do'. In fact the Barbican is presenting more and more opera these days and next season plans a total of eight. 'I feel really strongly that we have a role to play. It's about giving these works an airing, getting people to hear these different sounds, and putting them on to the table for debate – whether it is Saariaho's *L'amour de loin*, these American pieces, or the baroque opera that we programme.'

Van Leer even feels that by testing public reaction with works at the Barbican it can, in part, help opera houses gauge their viability on the main stage – he cites *Nixon in China* as an example of an opera which had two sold out performances in 1998 (Nicholas Payne attended one of them) as part of the Barbican's *Inventing America* festival. 'I think that maybe started people thinking that there is an appetite for this work and it may even have been a contributing factor in the ENO staging *Nixon in China*.'

'If we can facilitate the process in some way and open doors even just a crack then I think we have played a useful role for both the public and for the music industry as a whole.'

El Nino is on 26 and 28 June and *A Streetcar Named Desire* on 25 and 27 June

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An opera in waiting: *Streetcar Named Desire*