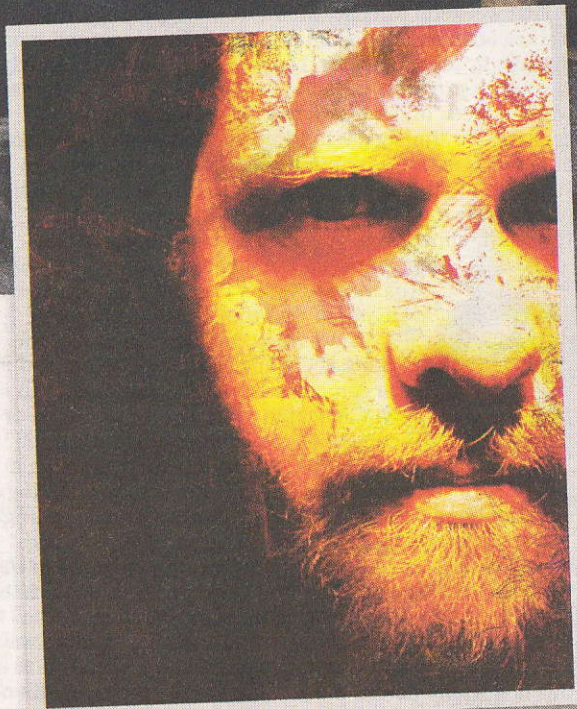


Lovers in arms





It may have a gay, pacifist subtext, but *David Et Jonathas* will stay faithful to its authentic baroque charms while moving closer to our times, writes **David Kettle**

“IT’S basically a pacifist opera,” explains director Andreas Homoki. “I think everybody knows that it’s a homosexual story, and that’s clearly an accepted thing, even in the Bible.” Conductor William Christie carries on the theme: “There’s a basic premise – which is the love between David and Jonathas – and that’s very important in this production.”

So, a gay, pacifist opera. With these contemporary-sounding themes, you’d be forgiven for thinking we were discussing some undiscovered gem by Britten, or something bang up to date. In fact, the piece in question dates right back to the 17th century.

Don’t be too surprised, though. Opera might still have been in its infancy then, and at its most formal and styl-

ised. But the composer of *David Et Jonathas* – which visits the Edinburgh International Festival for three performances of a thought-provoking new production directed by Homoki and conducted by Christie – is no ordinary figure. Marc-Antoine Charpentier was a rival to the more successful Lully in France at the time of Louis XIV, but what he might have lacked in status he more than made up for in music that has a freedom and sensuality seldom found in that era.

He’s long been championed by the US-born and now French-based period performance expert Christie, who named his exceptional ensemble, Les Arts Florissants, after another of Charpentier’s stage works. He even suggests that *David et Jonathas*’s gay subtext may have had a personal

resonance with the composer: “I have strong ideas about Charpentier’s sensitivity to these issues,” he explains, but won’t be drawn into further speculation.

The story is straight out of the Old Testament, with the giant-killing shepherd boy David at first welcomed into the home of Israelite king Saul, then later banished when the older man grows jealous of his popularity, and forced to join the enemy Philistine camp. The gay storyline comes from the close relationship that develops between David and Saul’s son Jonathas – a relationship made all the more poignant when David is later forced into battle against his beloved friend. It’s from this situation, and from the love story set against conflict both between peoples and within a family, that Charpen-

tier seems to be making his pacifist point. “It’s a very close, idealised friendship within the opera, but they’re clearly more than just friends,” says Homoki. “I’m trying to show the great affection and closeness, but it’s also quite innocent – I’m not trying to make a gay political statement.”

And neither are Christie and Homoki trying to impose a modern interpretation on the work that simply isn’t there in the original. For the conductor, the nature of the relationship between David and Jonathas is embedded within the opera itself. “Let’s face it, the music of Charpentier is uncompromising in terms of its sensuality, and the text makes no bones about the fact that these two kids are in love with each other.” Which might raise eyebrows, certain-



Top of their range: from left to right, Pascal Charbonneau as David embraces Ana Quintans as Jonathas; neighbours eavesdropping; David surrounded. Photographs: Jen Turner/P Victor

ly given the origins of the opera as a piece of educational entertainment in a Parisian all-male Jesuit school in the 1680s. How would its themes have been accepted at the time? "It's not by accident that the Jesuits were using this subject," says Homoki. "Homosexuality was clearly something they lived with."

There's an added complexity to the love story in this new production, though, because of its singers. It is Canadian tenor Pascal Charbonneau who plays David, and Jonathas is soprano Ana Quintans – both stalwarts of Christie's period-performance stable. "In the original the roles both would have been sung by boys from the school," says Homoki. "We also discussed the possibility of using boys, but if you know the difficulties that even the best boy singers have in singing and acting together, it would have been very difficult."

"More than that," Christie continues, "at the particular moment in social history that we're in now, using boys would have been a very provocative kind of statement." In any case, David, who is slightly older than Jonathas, would originally have been sung by an haute-contre, a very high tenor – in other words, a boy whose voice had already broken. Charbonneau's performance is at the top of his vocal range, and it perplexed some

critics at the production's premiere in Aix-en-Provence. "But I wanted someone young, and someone who you can hear is having to make an effort with their voice in the role," explains Christie. And that's entirely in keeping with David's character in the opera. "Let's face it, he's clever, brash, impulsive, and he's streetwise too – I wouldn't want to spend too much time with him," says Christie.

The notion of historical authenticity is, of course, central to Christie's approach, and he's straightforward about it.

“Both roles would have been sung by boys from the school”

"Musical archaeology is terribly important," he says. "I'm playing with a period band, with people who have devoted their lives to period performance practice. That's a bit of a frightening term – it might suggest that we're kind of pedantic. I was once told that I was an Ayatollah of music!"

In fact, those years of historical investigation are vital in even bringing an opera like this to the stage, as Christie

explains. "It often comes as a great surprise to people to hear that the score gives almost no indications of dynamics, of phrasing, articulation, and of instrumentation a lot of the time. All this knowledge provides a framework, but within that, you've got enormous freedom."

So if the musicians are staying true to the piece as it would have been heard in Charpentier's time, is it the same case with the production? According to Homoki, that's an entirely different matter. "At the original performance in 1688, the opera was performed around a five-act spoken Latin tragedy on the story of Saul, which has been lost," he explains. "So we're already violating the piece by leaving out the drama." Instead, what drives him is to make the work's themes relevant to today's audience, and to that end he's updated the setting to the Mediterranean at an unspecified time in the 20th century. "We brought it as close as possible to our own times, but it could be the south of France, or maybe Algeria, or the former Yugoslavia. Some reviews said that it's set in Israel and Palestine, but that's totally wrong – we're not trying to make a contemporary political statement."

The production's most striking feature is its ingenious wooden frame that expands and contracts to contain the

action, sometimes dividing into two or three separate boxes to allow almost cinematic split-screen effects. "We can move the walls and ceiling of the staging to emphasise psychological feelings," says Homoki, "like getting more and more claustrophobic as the walls close in, or suddenly feeling completely exposed on a widening stage that makes you seem smaller and smaller. We use these effects to emphasise the internalised moments that would normally just be a singer singing an aria on stage – they become part of a more dynamic production."

The Aix-en-Provence premiere took place in an open-air theatre, but Edinburgh's performances will be safely protected from the elements inside the Festival Theatre. "It won't be quite the same animal in Scotland," says Christie, "but it makes no difference to the music whether it's indoors or outdoors. I couldn't imag-

ine a better audience for this piece than an Edinburgh audience – they want to make new discoveries, and they're intellectually keen. I think it's going to go down very well." With its timeless yet provocative themes and its bold production, he might well be right. **fw**

David et Jonathas, Edinburgh Festival Theatre, Friday, 19 and 20 August. www.eif.co.uk

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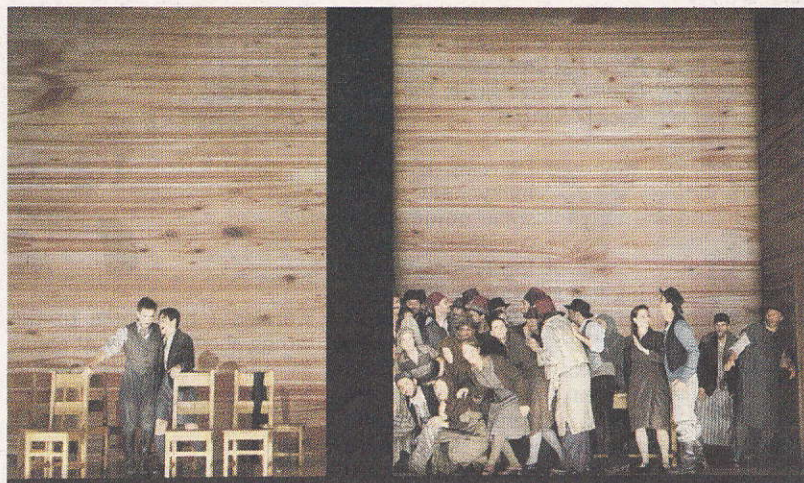
Clemency

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BILL PATERSON

DEARBHLA MOLLOY





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