

Opera

Love and Other Demons

Glyndebourne

★★★★★



Andrew Clements

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When it comes to presenting new works, Glyndebourne is not renowned for adventurousness, so it is a measure of how Peter Eötvös's status as an opera composer has climbed that he should be the first non-British composer to have a stage work premiered by the company. *Love and Other Demons* is Eötvös's fifth full-scale opera, and if structurally it is his most conventional so far, it is also well made and musically rewarding.

The composer has admitted that he set out to write a bel canto work for Glyndebourne, and that Gabriel García Márquez's 1994 novella of religious intolerance, demonic possession and illicit love seemed to contain all the operatic ingredients he needed. The English-language libretto by Kornel Hamvai fillets the already slender tale expertly enough, but leaves the piece curiously deracinated. By removing its 18th-century Latin American context almost entirely, the power of Márquez's magic realism is neutralised, leaving just an unsavoury story not far removed from Ken Russell's *The Devils*, with an ending that seems carelessly inconclusive.

Eötvös's confident score, though, is full of authentically magical things. His orchestral imagination is keen and he has simplified his musical language without ever making it simplistic. There are ravishing sounds here, combined with equally convincing vocal writing often spun over diaphanous textures, even though sometimes the drama needs more of a musical push.

It helps that the Glyndebourne performance is so accomplished. Conductor Vladimir Jurowski makes the music shimmer and glow, and provides the singers with maximum support. Allison Bell takes on with gusto the demanding coloratura of the central character, Sierva Maria, the young girl who is incarcerated in a convent after apparently contracting rabies; Nathan Gunn is the hunky priest sent to exorcise her demons but who falls in love with her instead. There are wonderfully observed character roles from Jean Rigby as Sierva Maria's fellow inmate and

Felicity Palmer as the abbess, and from John Graham-Hall as a doctor (the only enlightenment figure in this god-obsessed society), Robert Brubaker as the girl's father and Mats Almgren as the local bishop.

Only Silviu Purcarete's production disappoints for its failure to evoke any real sense of place, despite the lavish use of video projections full of writhing bodies, insects and reptiles; someone might have pointed out to him that there are no chameleons in South America.

· This article was amended on Wednesday August 13 2008. Because of an editing error the name of the composer Peter Eötvös appeared throughout as Eövös. This has been corrected.