



Gingerbread and green tea
Kazushi Ono conducts Glyndebourne's
first-ever production of *Hänsel und Gretel*
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This summer, Glyndebourne mounts its first-ever production of *Hänsel und Gretel*. Conducting the way through the depths of the forest is Kazushi Ono. His stay in Sussex represents a sylvan interlude between two important urban commitments: the current season is his last as Music Director of La Monnaie in Brussels and in autumn he takes over as Principal Conductor of the Opéra de Lyon.

Ono brings a wealth of experience to Humperdinck's idiosyncratic fusion of Romantic splendour and disarming simplicity. "There is certainly a Wagnerian base to the orchestral sound, but Humperdinck also succeeds in capturing the lightness of children's theatre," he explains. "*Hänsel und Gretel* was one of the first operas I conducted, even before I came to Europe in the 1980s to work in Munich with Wolfgang Sawallisch – the piece is very popular in Japan." He is looking forward to collaborating with the London Philharmonic – which he conducted for the first time in early 2007 – and with French director Laurent Pelly, who triumphed last year with the storybook *Fille du régiment* at Covent Garden, and whose fantasy credentials include *The Love of Three Oranges* and *Cendrillon* ... "Laurent has some fascinating ideas about the Witch's Gingerbread Cottage as a symbol of consumption," adds Ono.

The poles of Ono's operatic repertoire are Mozart, Verdi, Wagner and modern opera, covering both the 20th century and contemporary works. "My time in Munich with Sawallisch gave me substantial exposure to Wagner, and when I moved on to Karlsruhe [where Ono was General Music Director from 1996 to 2002], I had the opportunity to conduct almost the entire Wagner canon, including the *Ring*." The Wagner tradition in Karlsruhe goes back to Felix Mottl, who, having played an important role in the early years of the Bayreuth Festival, spent more than 20 years in charge of the city's music.

After Karlsruhe, Ono succeeded Antonio Pappano at La Monnaie. His first production, Strauss' *Elektra* was described by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* as "the miracle of Brussels", and his other major productions at the Belgian house have included *Don Giovanni*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, *Aida*, *Falstaff*, *Boris Godunov*, *The Fiery Angel*, *The Rake's Progress*, *Peter Grimes*, and a number of new works, including *Ballata* by Luca Francesconi, *Hanjo* by Toshio Hosokawa and *Julie* by Philippe Boesmans.

Maybe surprisingly, *Werther* in December 2007 was Ono's first assumption of a French opera in Brussels ... "It's a city with roots in both French and Flemish culture, but the Monnaie has been very keen to establish its own identity under Bernard Focroulle, who, after 15 years, recently left to take over at Aix-en-Provence ... Audiences in Brussels are very receptive to a wide repertoire.. We've played contemporary works to sold-out houses and they've participated enthusiastically in workshops, discussions and introductory talks. It's always very important to work at evoking the public's interest."

Community outreach is very important to Ono, and the Opéra de Lyon's record in this area was an important factor in his decision to move to the city, where he will spend four months a year. "The workshop for building the stage sets was established in a deprived area of Lyon and provides employment for local people and educational events for local children. The opera house itself hosts events such as

concerts of North African music, which attract a new public to the building. A cultural institution shouldn't wait for the audience to come, but should go out and find it. In Japan I give a week of lecture concerts each year for people who don't normally have access to classical music ... All this is part of my life's work. There is no future for classical music if it remains limited to people from a certain background ... Anyone can appreciate classical music if given the opportunity."

In charge of the Opéra de Lyon is Serge Dorny, who worked at La Monnaie with Gerard Mortier in the 1980s and who ran the London Philharmonic from 1996 to 2003. As Principal Conductor, Ono is happy to focus on the music rather than on administration: "Principal Conductor' is a simple and precise definition. I will be able to spend the majority of my time doing what a conductor has to do ... working with the stage directors, the soloists, orchestra and chorus." He is committed to two new productions and a number of concerts per season. He launched his tenure in 2008-09 with two 20th-century works, Prokofiev's *The Gambler* and Berg's *Lulu*; planned for 2009-10 are Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* and a new work written for Karita Mattila by the Paris-based Finnish composer, Kaija Saariaho, while 2010-11 will bring Verdi and Wagner: *Luisa Miller* and *Parsifal*. An exciting initiative is the sharing of new works between Lyon, the Amsterdam Opera and the Berlin Staatsoper – with premieres just one week apart in each city.

Ono clearly retains the enterprising spirit that brought him to Europe in the first place. "When I was growing up we didn't have a national opera company in Japan. By going to Munich I was able to come to grips with a wide repertoire, particularly through working with Sawallisch and with Giuseppe Patanè, who was a master of Italian opera." The first opera Ono saw in Munich was Hindemith's *Cardillac*, which he conducts at the Bastille in early 2008. In the 1990s, as Principal Conductor of the Tokyo Philharmonic, he mounted concert performances of operas that had been rarely seen in Japan, including works by Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Janáček, Britten and Strauss (the first performance in the country of *Die schweigsame Frau*).

Around the world, his guest appearances in opera have included La Scala (Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in 2007, with a return planned for Verdi's *Macbeth*) and the Met (*Aida* in 2007, with *Der fliegende Holländer* scheduled for 2009-10). In the orchestral repertoire he has appeared with, among others the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Boston Philharmonic, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Israel Philharmonic, Vienna Radio Symphony and, in the UK, the London Philharmonic, the BBC Symphony, BBC National Orchestra of Wales and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra who he conducts on the 21 February 2008 in a programme of Richard Strauss and Prokofiev.

Every year he spends two to three weeks performing in Japan: "There is an enormous amount of musical activity in Japan and it's at a very high level ... There are eight professional orchestras in Tokyo alone, and their technical and artistic standard is very impressive. If, as a Japanese musician, you come to Europe to learn, you always have the option to go home if it proves hard to develop a career outside Japan. If you choose the international route, there are fewer guarantees." While Ono now makes the majority of his career in Europe, the powerful culture of his homeland retains its influence on him. "From a very early age I wanted to be a conductor ... There is a photo of me aged three or four 'conducting' with a chopstick. My father is an engineer, while my mother is a teacher of the tea ceremony. In our home the special room for the tea ceremony was next to the music room with the piano. They were completely different spaces, but the tea ceremony room always evoked a deep, meditative mood in me ... I think that, subconsciously, it helps me still."

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