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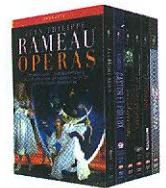
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COVER: Sabine Devieille. Photo by Marc Ribes / ERATO

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Welcome



BENJAMIN EDWARDS

The past two decades have seen a rush to build new infrastructure for culture across the world. State-of-the-art opera houses by famous architects have sprung up in cities from Florence to St Petersburg, Dallas and Beijing. Politicians like new buildings – they are attention-grabbing and bring immediate kudos in the eyes of voters. How these gleaming new 'palaces of art' are sustained and funded, however, becomes someone else's problem as political regimes come and go.

The current debate in Sweden over the future provision for opera has thrown up some interesting angles to the opposing opinions across the political divide. On the one hand, Swedes have looked enviously at their neighbours in Norway and Denmark, where iconic new opera houses have sprung up at the heart of ambitious projects for urban regeneration in Oslo and Copenhagen, attracting international press coverage as well as pricking the curiosity of local audiences and tourists.

The Swedish government has earmarked up to 2bn Swedish Krona (around £200m) to invest in the future of opera in Stockholm, but the current artistic regime has spoken out in favour of renewing and updating its current historic home in the heart of the Swedish capital rather than expending heavily on a new architectural 'statement' away from the centre.

This seems very sensible in view of the experience of other cities where short-term capital investment in spectacular new buildings has resulted in years of struggle to fund the work that goes on inside them. Nobody can say that companies like Welsh National Opera or Valencia's Palau de les Arts have had an easy time trying to make ends meet in their state-of-the-art modern opera houses. The successful renovation of historic theatres such as the Royal Opera House in London, the Teatro Real in Madrid and the opera house in Lyons has, on the other hand, provided a real spur for development and innovation in these companies, while capitalising on matchless city-centre locations and a strong sense of heritage.

I was interested in the experience of our 'First Timers' at the opera (related on page 59 of this issue). Their first ever encounter with live opera took place recently at the Coliseum, English National Opera's splendidly restored home in the heart of London's West End. Apart from the impact of the performance of *Peter Grimes*, one of the most memorable aspects of the evening, they say, was the theatre itself. The sense of history, the beauty and the grandeur of the place prepared them for 'something special that demands our attention'.

There's a tendency among certain arts pundits to believe that historic opera houses are somehow inhibiting the development of opera, putting off audiences who may be intimidated by their opulence and highbrow associations. In my experience, however, newcomers to opera welcome the sense of occasion and history that these great theatres embody. Sweden's opera lovers should join the campaign to hang on to their stunning old theatre. Give it a facelift, by all means, but then spend money where it counts – on putting on the finest performances possible.

Ashutosh Khandekar

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