



# OUTDOOR PURSUITS

Writing this on returning from what is absolutely and without equivocation my last country-house *Così* for 2014 (it's autumn and my trousers have turned green from picnicking on damp grass), I've come to the conclusion that although human beings love opera in the open air, God probably doesn't. If he did, he wouldn't sabotage it quite so often.

Sing under the stars in Britain and the chances are that you'll be rained off, picking up pneumonia in the process. Do it in a warmer climate and some other meteorological hazard will hit you for six. If it's a seriously warm climate, warmth itself becomes a problem. All of which means you need a Plan B. Now, if there's one thing you can usually guarantee with open-air opera, it is that there is no Plan B: nowhere to shelter, nowhere to escape the wet, the cold, the heat, the sun ... or the mosquitoes. If midge-bites seem a modest price to pay to experience the *Aida* of your life, believe me they're not.

At Bregenz, on the shores of Lake Constance in Austria, the open-air thing happens on a scale like nowhere else, and the insects fly over the water like a Luftwaffe attack force. Cast your eyes around the auditorium and you'll see several thousand people slapping at their wrists and thighs (I think it's where the stage director Peter Sellars got the idea for those chorus gestures that he does). The next morning, over breakfast at your hotel, don't expect to hear analysis of the performance; only remedies will be discussed. 'I used this spray, it didn't work.' 'Well, try this cream...'

This year, in fact, I've done a lot of open-air, and they have usually involved some kind of challenge or emergency. One was at Seillans in the south of France where there's

a festival called *Musique Cordiale* that stages opera in the town square. At face value, it's a perfect setting, with much charm. However, there are always problems.

In the past I've been there with a howling dog locked by its absent owners in a room that overlooked the stage. No one could get to it. It clearly didn't like the music, and its lungs appeared to be in better shape than those of anybody in the cast. It drowned them out through several acts, adding a memorable gloss to that old warning not to work with animals.



Heat haze: the stunning Roman amphitheatre at Aspendos at the end of a baking day

This year there was no dog to be heard in Seillans. Happily, the town is in a part of France where, in the summer, you can reasonably hope it isn't going to rain. God, however, will not be beaten: he does wind as well. On the day I flew in (on a scarily unstable flight) to see a sharp, smart *Barber of Seville* directed by the multi-talented John Savournin (he also sings and runs a company of his own called Charles Court Opera), there were hurricane-force gales that blew the whole show off the stage.

Amid an interesting combination of heroic effort and considerable chaos, everything was relocated to a sort of parish hall some streets away, assisted by the local gendarme and the fire brigade, who clearly

didn't want to miss out on a good disaster: excellent for training purposes. Although we didn't get the show as it was meant to be, enough was salvaged to reward the effort. It was spunkily conducted too by the unflappable Mark Austin.

On a grander scale, I also went this year to the Aspendos International Opera and Ballet Festival in southern Turkey, not far from Antalya, where the draw isn't so much the music as the setting. No one seems to know about Aspendos, but it functions as a summer showcase for the various Turkish

opera companies – there are six full-time, I was surprised to learn – that run under the control of one man, Selman Ada. Mr Ada also happens to control Aspendos: an impressive case of many eggs in the same basket. So the companies line up to do their stuff, and if the *Aida* I caught was anything to go by, the stagings are no more than costumed traffic management (this way the temple guard, keep right priestesses) saved by better-than-expected voices.

It's the *venue* that impresses: an astonishingly well-preserved/reconstituted Roman theatre that seats 15,000 and delivers the immaculate acoustic that such places are supposed to.

It could be a joy except for one thing: heat. The shows don't start till nine in the evening, but even then it's like an oven softly grilling your internal organs and appalling for the singers, swathed in their Egyptian robes and rubber bald caps. If they shared my thoughts, they'd have been thinking: ancient architecture is all very well, but give me air-conditioning contained by an efficient roof; and walls; and padded seats; and toilets that aren't portaloos. The sacrifices we all make for art are quite enough, without the great outdoors to multiply the misery. ■