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## Antony Feeny: Will country-house opera's champagne image survive Brexit?

Posted By *Antony Feeny* On May 18, 2017 @ 10:00 am  
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Country-house opera: a small but critical part of the operatic economy, staging creative productions and innovative repertoire while offering career opportunities for hardworking, but underpaid, musicians. No, that doesn't sound right. Let's try again.

Country-house opera: a load of overdressed and over-accented toffs snoozing through antiquated performances after indulgence in champagne and quails' egg sandwiches.

Well, both – and neither – are true, depending on your point of view, or even on which side of the proscenium arch you're positioned. The first description is the practical day-to-day reality those in the opera business would recognise, but which isn't going to sell many seats. The second is the cliché beloved of those churning out those sight bites that seem to have perennial appeal, at least to those who never attend opera.

And therein lies the dilemma of country-house opera and to some extent of the art form itself. Although opera houses are packed with 'ordinary people' paying less than the price of a ticket for a football match to follow their musical passions, the appeal of country-house opera is precisely that it isn't ordinary; that it is that special and exclusive experience that many crave – and yet which in this democratic age we simultaneously believe should be available to all. In the words of Anthony Whitworth-Jones, former head of the two biggest country-house opera companies, it is distinctive because it "combines so many other pleasures with serious opera, including stunning gardens and landscape, and good food and drink". And it appeals to us in an era when "people want to acquire new experiences rather than new objects", as Lizzie Graham, the founder of Longborough Festival Opera, puts it.

Most people probably have a mental image of dinner-suited guests picnicking on a perfectly groomed, sunlit lawn set against a historic building; an image that perhaps derives from the place that defined the archetype, Sussex's Glyndebourne.

Active since 1934, Glyndebourne has striven ever since to up its game, moving beyond mere country-house status to become a globally renowned opera festival. Family-owned, attached to a house or estate, requiring (but now only suggesting) elegant attire, promoting picnics and fine-dining, it has set the tone for others that followed.



(<https://cdn.thestage.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/17163843/Garsington-Opera-at-Wormsley-credit-Mike-Hoban.jpg>) <sup>[1]</sup>

*Garsington Opera at Wormsley. Photo: Mike Hoban*

In England alone these include Garsington (1989), Longborough (1991), Iford Arts (1993), Grange Park (1998) and the Grange Festival (2017), Nevill Holt (2013), and possibly even Opera Holland Park (1989). Arguably the model has spread internationally to places such as Finland's Savonlinna (1967) and America's Santa Fe (1957), which also offer a unique location – an element that Garsington's executive director Nicola Creed terms “key to the phenomenon”.

But it's easy to get carried away by the history, the glamour and the spin, which country-house opera's critics deplore as detrimental to the art form. So let's revert to the business and to the core English companies.

Given the regular media attention, the small scale of country-house opera may surprise. The annual income of the handful of English companies mentioned above is about £40 million, of which Glyndebourne accounts for some 60%. In total, this is about the same size as the

income of English National Opera alone, or about half of the Royal Opera, excluding its ballet. Other, much smaller, enterprises vying for inclusion in the country-house category barely register.

This money buys serious artistic purpose as well as the endlessly popular *Bohemes* and *Traviatas*. Each company has sought its own particular artistic niche: Glyndebourne with Mozart and Strauss; Garsington with rare works by Vivaldi and Rossini; Opera Holland Park with long-unheard Italian verismo operas; Longborough with more heavyweight Wagner; and so on. Increasingly they also have a track record for community work and for new commissions especially aimed at young audiences, but including full-scale works – such as Brett Dean's *Hamlet* opening at Glyndebourne in June.

If the apocryphal toffs were attracted at least once by the champagne and the atmosphere, the aficionados have kept returning for the serious and high-quality performances to take advantage of what Garsington's Creed describes as “really good singers in beautiful productions”.

Indeed, according to its general director, Sebastian Schwarz, “around two-thirds of patrons at Glyndebourne book more than one opera in a season”.

The musicians too have kept coming. The archives are full of famous operatic names who had early opportunities at Glyndebourne, including renowned Wagnerian soprano Birgit Nilsson (1951) and Luciano Pavarotti (1964). Generations of their successors have gained valuable stage experience with extended rehearsal time to add to roles regularly available from non-country-house companies, such as Opera North.

The money side is more complicated. The country-house opera companies themselves tout their lack of government subsidy as a badge of honour in this market-oriented age, pointing in particular to the reliance on a combination of box office income (more than 50%) and philanthropy (more than 30%).

Corporate sponsorship may have declined over the years as funds are diverted to more politically popular activities. But, as Whitworth Jones points out, “the explosion of the finance sector has enabled the replacement of sponsorship by generous private philanthropy”.

However, critics might point out that this help is greatly assisted by publicly funded tax breaks, which are tantamount to subsidy. They might also point to lower wages than at the larger opera houses but, then again, lower pay and uncertain incomes are hardly unique to country-house opera.

So where is the country-house opera business heading? Things appear to be on a roll, with new opera houses being built for Grange Park and Nevill Holt, and expanded activities at others. Their combined income has increased by 20% over the past five years, while, during the same period, the total income of the four major regular British opera companies (apart from the Royal Opera) has increased by only 3%, or less than inflation. This suggests little incentive to change a formula that works. But perhaps it works only, or mainly, because of the way the country itself has changed during the past generation.

Can a business model based on relatively high prices for seats that are fully occupied, together with substantial philanthropic funding at the whims of the rich few, outlive a prolonged recession and post-Brexit economic uncertainties? Can a champagne image that repels as many audiences as it attracts survive any moves towards a more egalitarian social climate, or simply a shift towards different and trendier experiences?

*For every person who depends on country-house opera, another highlights its archaic image*

So far, the model has proved adept at handling changes in the social and economic climate, even including the difficult 1970s and the 2008 financial crisis. It may yet prove robust in rockier times. But the phenomenon seems to have as many critics as supporters: for every person who depends on country-house opera or enjoys its aesthetic benefits, there is another who highlights its archaic image, or feels it is undermining the appeal of the operatic art form in the longer term.

So, country-house opera: a successful business in its unique way of working, but, like all successful businesses, right to feel paranoid about future challenges.

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