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Next issue Wed 13th June Deadline 10am, Tue 12th June

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REVIEW: OPERA

GARSINGTON OPERA 2001 9TH JUNE - 8TH JULY

9th, 13th, 18th, 23rd, 27th, 29th June

12th, 14th, 19th, 25th, 30th June

and 1st, 3rd, 5th, 8th July: 6.15pm

and 4th, 7th July: 6.15pm

and 6th July: 6pm

26th, 28th June

DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE (Mozart)

LA GAZZETTA (Rossini)

INTERMEZZO (R Strauss)

Garsington Manor is one of those charmed places that never seem to be crowded - even when close to 600 people are roaming its grounds - and which always contrive to look beautiful even in the dullest weather (an asset of particular value in rain-plagued Oxfordshire). Such is its genteel beauty, with its venerable stone walls, trim hedges, secluded nooks, charming flower garden and breathtaking views, that Garsington would be an idyllic spot for a picnic even without any other enticements. But for one short month each summer, other enticements there certainly are: for the manor is the setting for an annual opera festival of international repute, whose only real flaw is that it doesn't last for longer.

Saturday night saw the opening of ington Opera's thirteenth season. In the few years since its conception, the festival has rapidly acquired an enviable reputation, not just for the consistently high quality of its music and the imaginativeness of its productions, but also because of the commitment of Leonard Ingrams, owner of the manor and Festival Chairman, to exploring more adventurous repertoire. Audiences at Garsington this year

first ever UK performance of Rossini's La Gazetta, a comic masterpiece all but forgotten since its premiere in 1816, as well as being given a rare chance to see Richard Strauss's 1923 *Inter-*

Alongside these two, and opening this year's season, is an intelligent, witty and sumptuously beautiful production of Mozart's Die Zauberflöte, designed by Rae Smith and directed by James Macdonald. Set in a country house at the beginning of the 20th century, the production makes full, visually stunning use of the walls of the house which surround the stage

scenery which is set off perfectly with

some glorious period costume. The temporal setting also allows for the exploration of new layers of meaning in the obscure Masonic ritual of the original, linking the inevitable boys' club atmosphere with a whiff of British inter-war countryhouse Nazism. The opening performance on Saturday night was by turns hilariously comic and gravely sombre, with some outstanding individual performances - especially engaging was Riccardo Novaro who delighted all with his boundlessly energetic rendition of Papageno.

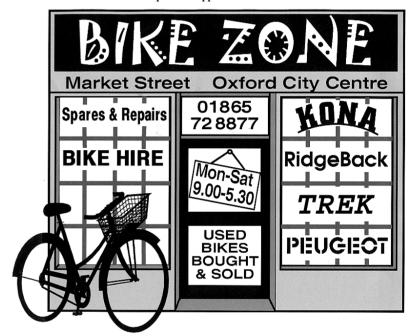
Another of the aims of Ingrams

and his fellow festival organisers is that Garsington Opera should foster outstanding young talent - should provide a platform for those just beginning to make their name on the world-wide opera stage. Often this pays off, bringing to the festival performers whose accomplished technique is combined with youthful exuberance: Julie Unwin (First Lady), Felicity Hammond (Pamina) and Kevin Matthews (Armed Man) were three whose whose particularly impressed on Seturday. Some voices particularly impressed on Saturday. Sometimes, however, the performers are betrayed by their youth: Rufus Müller sang pleasantly enough as Tamino, but seemed to have some difficulty in engaging the top of his voice.

Accompanying all performances is Garsngton Opera's exemplary orchestra, wh with the sonorous yet delicate precision one would expect from an ensemble which incorporates the renowned Guildhall Strings. Combine the quality of the productions, the beauty of the surroundings, the amenities (including a champagne tent and a restaurant that can provide anything from a luxury picnic hamper to a full three-course dinner), and the convenience of the location (the manor is barely a 20 minute drive from Oxford), and it is easy to see why Garsington's outdoor opera house is packed out for every performance. Those who don't manage to secure tickets for this summer should bear in mind that there is also a chamber music series, of just as high a quality, at Garsington every spring. Yet another excuse to visit this idyllic spot within a stone's throw of the city.

Matthew Rogers, 9 / 06 / 01

Garsington Manor is a short drive South East of Oxford; from the ring road's Cowley Interchange, take the B480 towards Watlington and follow the signs. Further details about Garsngton Opera and the Spring Chamber Music Series can be found at www.dailyinfo.co.uk, or by calling 361636.



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