



Opera in Paris

Handel, Verdi & Bellini at the Palais Garnier & Opéra Bastille

13–17 February 2024 (MK 173)

5 days • £3,020

(including tickets to 3 operas)

Lecturer: Dr Michael Downes

Laurent Pelly's highly praised production of Handel's masterpiece, *Giulio Cesare*, at the Palais Garnier.

Simon Stone's exciting new take on *La Traviata*, featuring Nadine Sierra, René Barbera and Ludovic Tézier.

Peter Sellars' brand-new production of a Bellini rarity, *Beatrice di Tenda*.

Backstage visits offer behind-the-scenes insights into Paris's two magnificent opera houses, the Palais Garnier and Opéra Bastille.

Excursions to the Cité de la Musique and the recently refurbished Musée Carnavalet.

The city of Paris and the history of Italian opera are intricately and intriguingly intertwined. Rossini's last and perhaps greatest opera, *William Tell*, was premiered in Paris and its composer spent much of the last decade of his life in an apartment in the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin, a stone's throw from where the Opéra Garnier now stands. The nearby Boulevard des Italiens, which runs north-east from the Opéra's magnificent façade, takes its name from the Théâtre Italien which once stood nearby, one of many institutions that sprang up in the eighteenth century to meet the French public's insatiable demand for Italian opera. And Italian composers throughout the genre's history have drawn inspiration from both the literature and the everyday life of the French capital.

This tour offers an exceptional opportunity to reap the benefits of this mutual and long-standing love affair between French culture and Italian music, with outstanding productions of key works from three successive phases of the Italian operatic tradition.

Our musical programme for the tour begins in spectacular fashion with Laurent Pelly's highly praised production of *Giulio Cesare*, perhaps the greatest opera by Handel – a German who spent most of his life in London, but nonetheless one of the most significant contributors to the Italian operatic tradition. Set in Egypt and focusing on the love affair between two of the ancient world's most charismatic figures, Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, Handel's score fizzles with rhythmic



The Palais Garnier, by Henry Rushbury from 'Paris' by Sidney Dark.

energy and melodic invention.

Pelly's production promises to bring fresh insights into the relationship between ancient Egypt and the modern world. The cast includes the fast-rising Cuban-American soprano Lisette Oropesa as Cleopatra and the much-admired British counter-tenor Iestyn Davies as Tolomeo; Harry Bicket, one of Britain's leading exponents of period performance, makes his Paris Opéra debut as conductor. We experience Handel's masterpiece in the sumptuous surroundings of the Palais Garnier, that extraordinary monument to the central role that music and the arts have long played in the life of Paris.

The Sicilian-born Vincenzo Bellini followed in Rossini's footsteps by gravitating towards Paris at the height of his career: his final opera, *I puritani*, was commissioned by the Théâtre Italien. On this tour we have the rare opportunity to experience a production of *Beatrice di Tenda*: premiered at Venice's La Fenice theatre in 1833, two years after *Norma* and two years before *I puritani*, it is ripe for rediscovery.

Renowned American director Peter Sellars, well-known for his Handel productions at Glyndebourne and elsewhere, has chosen *Beatrice* as his first opera by an Italian composer, and his production promises to

draw out the work's contemporary political relevance. The superb British conductor Mark Wigglesworth, a former music director of English National Opera, leads a strong cast including the award-winning Arizona-born soprano Tamara Wilson in the title role.

Our final performance is of Verdi's *La Traviata*: along with Puccini's *La Bohème*, the best-known and most loved of all Italian operas set in Paris. Based on Alexandre Dumas's play *La dame aux camélias*, which was first performed in Paris in 1852, *La Traviata* premiered only a year later in Venice. Verdi was working at white-hot speed, but the score shows no sign of haste: it is replete with memorable melodies and profound characterisation, notably of Giorgio Germont, remorseful father of the impulsive Alfredo, who is played in this production by leading French baritone Ludovic Tézier.

Simon Stone's production has been praised for its insightful updating of the story, showing its continued relevance to a world obsessed with celebrity and social media; American soprano Nadine Sierra and Mexican-American tenor René Barbera star as Violetta and Alfredo. We see both *Beatrice di Tenda* and *La Traviata* at the Opéra Bastille, opened to mark the bicentenary of the French Revolution.

Opera in Paris
continued

Itinerary

Day 1. Travel by Eurostar at c. 10.30am from London St Pancras to Paris. Afternoon visit of the sumptuous Palais Garnier opera house.

Day 2. Morning lecture, then drive to Porte de la Villette to visit the Cité de la Musique and the music museum. Evening at the Palais Garnier: *Giulio Cesare* (George Frideric Handel), Laurent Pelly (director), Harry Bicket (conductor), Lisette Oropesa (Cleopatra), Marianne Crebassa (Sesto), Wiebke Lehmkuhl (Cornelia), Iestyn Davies (Tolomeo), Luca Pisaroni (Achilla), Rémy Brès (Nireno), Adrien Mathonat (Curio).

Day 3. A morning lecture precedes a guided tour of the Opéra Bastille. Lunch is followed by some free time. Evening at the Opéra Bastille: *Beatrice di Tenda* (Vincenzo Bellini), Peter Sellars (director), Mark Wigglesworth (conductor), Quinn Kelsey (Filippo Visconti), Tamara Wilson (Beatrice di Tenda), Natalia Kutateladze (Agnese del Maino), Pene Pati (Orombello), Amitai Pati (Anichino).

Day 4. Morning lecture then visit the Marais, a lovely district which is home to the Musée Carnavalet, with myriad collections devoted to the history of Paris, re-opened in 2021 after radical refurbishment. Evening at the Opéra Bastille: *La Traviata* (Giuseppe Verdi), Simon Stone (director), Giacomo Sagripanti (conductor), Nadine Sierra (Violetta Valéry), René Barbera (Alfredo Germont), Ludovic Tézier (Giorgio Germont), Marine Chagnon (Flora Bervoix), Cassandre Berthon (Annina), Maciej Kwaśnikowski (Gastone), Alejandro Balañas Vieites (Il Barone Douphol), Florent Mbia (Il Marchese d'Obigny), Hyun-Jong Roh (Giuseppe), Olivier Ayault (Domestico), Pierpaolo Palloni (Commissionario).

Day 5. The morning is free before the Eurostar to St Pancras, arriving at c. 4.30pm.

Lecturer

Dr Michael Downes. Director of Music at the University of St Andrews, musical director of St Andrews Chorus, Scotland's largest choral society, and founding artistic director of Byre Opera. He has lectured for most of the UK's leading opera companies and writes programme notes for Wigmore Hall and Aldeburgh Music. Publications include books written with and about contemporary British

composer Jonathan Harvey, and a collaboration with Nike Wagner, great-granddaughter of Richard; he is currently working on a new biography of Elgar for Oxford University Press.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,020 or £2,840 without Eurostar. **Single occupancy:** £3,490 or £3,310 without Eurostar.

Included: return rail travel (Standard Premier) by Eurostar from London to Paris; private coach for transfers; hotel accommodation; breakfasts, 3 dinners and 1 lunch with water, wine, coffee; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Music: tickets for 3 performances (Optima (top) category) are included costing c. £490.

Accommodation. Hotel Édouard 7 (hoteledouard7-paris.com): comfortable 4-star hotel, located on the Avenue de l'Opéra, a short walk from the Palais Garnier. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? Visits require a fair amount of walking and standing around. There are some late nights but starts are leisurely. You need to be able to lift your luggage on and off the train.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.