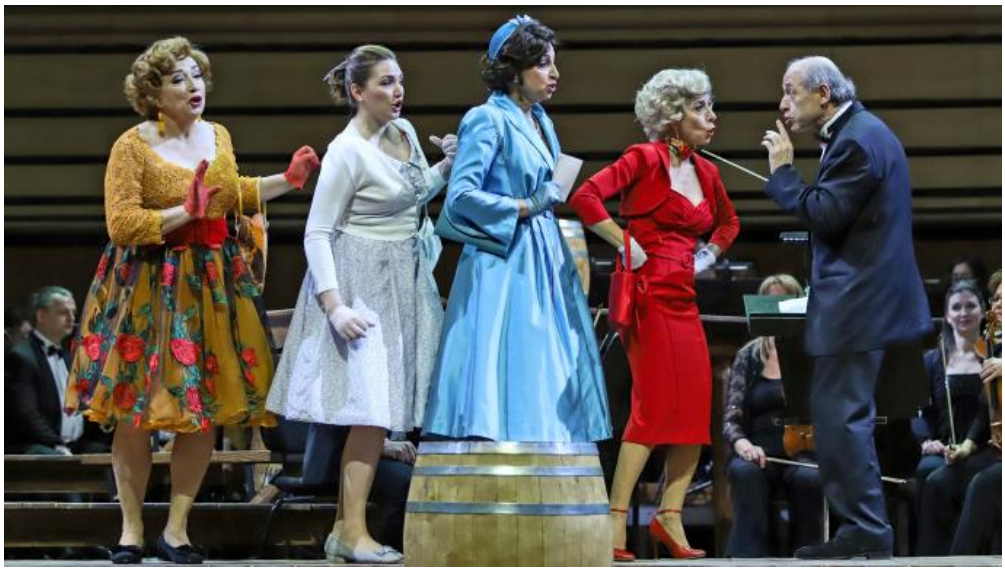
CLASSICAL

Ivan Fischer interview: Budapest Festival Orchestra and his revolutionary way with opera

The conductor is turning opera on its head with his bold and joyous attitude. And the crowds are loving it

Bryan Appleyard



'There is something about being close to each other': from left, Yvonne Naef, Sylvia Schwartz, Eva Mei, Laura Polverelli, Ivan Fischer and the BFO in Falstaff

JUDIT HORVATH

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It's Verdi, an aria from The Sicilian Vespers. The orchestra is playing, the soprano is singing. Then, without warning, all the players stand up and sing the chorus. The audience gasps. The next night, it's Verdi's opera Falstaff, and this time the audience just keeps gasping. The characters intertwine and react with the orchestra. They argue with the conductor, who grins and tut-tuts and, when Falstaff hits rock bottom, gives him a cloth and a cup of wine.

All of which would be amazing enough. But there is also the thrilling fact that Falstaff was Verdi's last opera, and I am watching it in the last building of Andrea Palladio, arguably the greatest and certainly the most influential architect who ever lived.

This first Vicenza Opera Festival at the Teatro Olimpico consists of two performances of Falstaff and a gala concert. The conductor Ivan Fischer created the shows and brought his Budapest Festival Orchestra, which he set up in 1983 as an annual-festival institution. It became a permanent orchestra in 1992, but he kept the word "festival" in the title. "I had this clear vision that every concert must be a festive occasion."

Part of this vision was his determination to change the nature of orchestras, concerts, operas, music-making: everything, basically. "I felt there was something jaded in the conventional orchestra life all over the world. I was dreaming of a group of committed creative artists and developed a whole web of reforms, then realised it in 1983." Did he succeed? "I would say 80% to 90% worked. It's not bad."

Even purists now acknowledge the BFO as one of the world's best. Yet it is unlike any other orchestra. The players are creators alongside the conductor — they contribute to repertoire and interpretation. In Falstaff, half of them become sprites. Furthermore, they spend much of their time in small bands, giving performances in prisons, hospitals, schools. There are surprise concerts in which the pieces are unannounced, even unknown in advance. There are also concerts for autistic children — Fischer has a son with autism.

"We do a lot of this, and I think it is what orchestras should do a little more. I think you need to plant the seed of classical music. The crucial age is between five and 10. If in those years you hear some classical music, it will stay with you, even if between 10 and 20 you only listen to pop music. If people are not exposed to classical music, for them it is scary. They don't believe they would understand it."

Fischer has four children, two from his first marriage and two from his second. His current wife, Gabriella Pivon, is a flautist in the BFO. One daughter, Nora, is a successful singer; he confidently expects to be known only as “Nora’s father” in the future.

We are in the breakfast room of his hotel in Vicenza. His accent is musically central European: “ways” comes out as “waaaayz”. He is leaning confidingly across the table, and the other guests all seem, understandably, to be listening. Fischer talks rather as he conducts: precise, intimate, clever and playful. He loves that last word.

“Music is a joyous activity, it’s not work. You play an instrument, and this word ‘play’ is beautiful because it should stay playful. For me, many orchestras seem to work rather than play. I think we have to bring out the inner child of adults.”

He formed the BFO to break down old musical divisions — between conductor, musicians, singers and, in opera, directors. It was a rebellion against the now rather fusty Romantic idea of the conductor as a lonely, bad-tempered genius who must be obeyed. Perhaps, also, it was a gesture of revolt against central Europe’s recent past and, sadly, its present.

Fischer was born in Budapest in 1951 to “completely secular” Jewish parents. This was a miracle. Systematic anti-semitism took hold in Hungary in 1933, the same year Hitler came to power. His maternal grandparents were Holocaust victims, but not his parents. His mother was forced to live “a little bit like Anne Frank”, and for 12 years his father dodged and weaved to keep himself alive. “Somehow he managed to survive — pure luck, I suppose,” Fischer says, shaking his head in wonder.

He was brought up in a flat opposite Budapest’s Opera House. He knew which piece was on by the time the lights went out: Tristan very late, Otello pretty early. There was no question about his future career.

“In this family a cultural activity was the only possibility. We didn’t talk about anything else. Music was the most natural thing. You learnt this instrument, you learnt that instrument. We had conversations around the dinner table about how Furtwängler or Klemperer conducted a certain Schubert symphony.”

His primary instrument was the cello, and that seemed to be that — but somehow, reluctantly, he fell into conducting by stumbling into a conducting competition in London, which, of course, he won.

“I completely admit that I am not a typical conductor because I always had a critical attitude, also a critical view about why orchestras became so rigid, unmovable, a frozen ritual. You see, I think a symphony orchestra is a beautiful part of our life, and I really enjoy it, but it is a little limited.”

This rebelliousness, I suspect, was as much about history as music. He had learnt of his grandparents’ deaths and the lives of his parents under two murderous anti-semitic regimes. This all came back to haunt him with the rise in Hungary of the extreme right-wing populist Fidesz party and the presidency of Viktor Orban.

Using his music, he signalled his disapproval, writing an opera, The Red Heifer, in 2013, about a celebrated “blood libel” affair in which Jews in a village were accused of murdering a girl, an act of supposed religious frenzy. The Jews were acquitted, but certain contemporary extremists had been claiming they were guilty.

The Red Heifer was a provocation; he was sailing close to the wind. Orban’s regime had been displaying clear signs of anti-semitism. But the BFO was by then generally regarded as Hungary’s greatest cultural export, and the government did not cut its funding. Bizarrely, however, the mayor of Budapest cut the whole of the city’s contribution: €650,000, 15% of the BFO’s funding. What’s his problem? “Please ask the mayor.”

He is now much more circumspect and won't be drawn on any outright criticism of Orban's government. Does he, I ask, feel alarmed about the wave of anti-semitism that has swept Europe, from Fidesz to Britain's Labour Party? "Not at all, it will pass. I don't think it's strong in Hungary. Of course, it's always alarming if it crops up, but I personally have never experienced any problems. I don't think it is in Hungary, or where I am in Berlin — it's not an issue."

I hope he's right, but I am not sure. For now, though, let's discuss a failed safety curtain at Kent Opera. He was the company's music director in the 1980s, just after he had formed the BFO. He was conducting La traviata when, one night — he can't remember the venue — the hydraulic system that operated the curtain broke, leaving it immovably down.

Fischer being Fischer, he decided that the show must go on, and the whole piece was played out in the thin strip of space between the curtain and the orchestra pit.

"It was a revelation. The closeness, there is something about being close to each other. You see, many stage performances put people at a distance — singers from the orchestra, singers from each other. Here, because of this accident, we were forced to be very close to each other. And, simply because of that, everybody had a feeling of hearing each other much better, much clearer. Then I realised the closeness can cause magic."

From that accident to Vicenza is a single step. I don't doubt the Teatro Olimpico in the city is the greatest theatre ever built — almost everything Palladio touched became the greatest of its kind — but it too has a narrow strip of stage. There is no safety curtain, only a permanent, beautiful classical wall, garlanded with statues. This place had been waiting almost 450 years for Fischer's Falstaff. Even the permanence of the backdrop becomes a Fischerian device.

"Because the backdrop is permanent and beautiful, it creates opera performances where you focus on other things. Usually you go to an opera and see this backdrop or another backdrop

the designer invented. You perceive this interpretation of the opera. Here we don't have that, so the interpretation has to come from playing, music-making — it forces us to be more honest. In this 16th-century installation, you have to do something that means something."

He is now thinking of getting an artist to do a similarly neutral 21st-century installation to provide a non-interpretive backdrop for his works.

One of the strangest things I read about Fischer before our meeting was that he advised his musicians that they may kill people. His point is that music is another space entirely, a free space. "We civilise ourselves as human beings — we don't want to be aggressive, we don't want to harm anybody. But in music, which is an abstract art, you may do all the things that are forbidden in real life."

His Falstaff embodies that exactly. Everything about it feels deliriously forbidden. There was a pause when it ended, as if everybody was too stunned or breathless to applaud. Then we all went wild, and then much wilder. Palladio would have been proud.

Ivan Fischer's recordings with the Budapest Festival Opera are available on Philips Classics and Channel Classics

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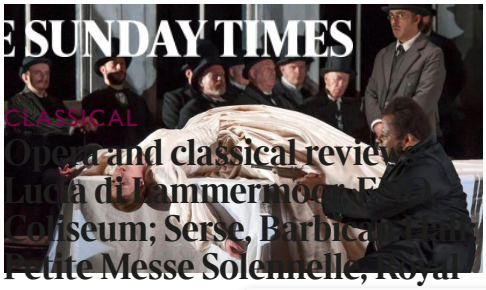

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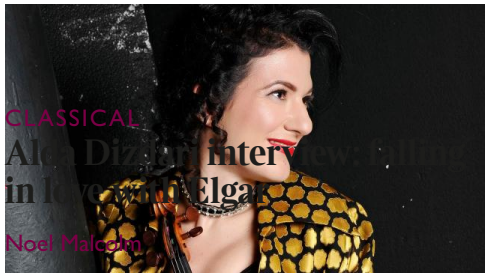

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