

ROAD TRIP

Robert Thicknesse heads to wild extremes of the Scotland to join a motley cast and crew from Scottish Opera as they bus their way around far-flung parts of the Highlands that other opera companies cannot reach...

I think it was the ferry crossing they were most worried about. Between Ullapool on the far northwest coast of Scotland, and Stornoway in the Outer Hebrides lies the wild Minch, 50 miles of wind-whipped waters inserting icicles of fear into the hearts of the Scottish Opera stalwarts, a little way into a 17-date tour of Donizetti's *Elixir of Love* around the country's furthest extremities. Things didn't get off to the best start: for two days in Ullapool the rain lashed down and immense gales battered the town...

Then *Opera Now* (in the form of yours truly) arrived in their midst – and the sun came out. Ullapool looked pretty, and the Minch subsided, not quite into a millpond, but calm enough for us to cross to the Hebrides without a queasy moment.

Scottish Opera has been touring in various ways for years. The company's task is to serve not merely Scotland's big towns and cities, though the country's scattered geography makes this a very specific challenge. Combining the roles of major national company and lean touring outfit – Opera North and English Touring Opera rolled into one, as it were – is a stretch, and in recent years Scottish Opera's small-scale tour has often taken the form of opera gobbets sung by a quartet with a piano in far-flung places. There has, to be fair, also been proper opera, albeit in scaled-down versions: Mozart's

Così fan tutte last year, Handel's *Rodelinda* before that.

This autumn's tour broke new ground in two ways: a princely five instruments (three strings, horn and guitar) and none other than Scottish Opera's director of music, Stuart Stratford, presiding. It's hard to imagine Stratford's predecessor Richard Armstrong bussing round the country like this, and it certainly shows a proper commitment to the company's duties.

Stratford is one year into a seven-year contract, which gives him time to impose his ideas of what the company should become. He has big plans and bigger ambitions involving a wholesale reinvigoration of a company whose reputation has faded: expanding the repertoire, operas in concert, site-specific productions (an idea picked up working with Graham Vick in Birmingham). As artistic director Oliver Mears has shown over the water at Northern Ireland Opera, with a bit of imagination and resourcefulness, you can make meagre budgets go a long way – and Scottish Opera's resources dwarf those in Belfast. Making the company's presence felt in the distant provinces is very much part of the plan: playing one night in a town like Stornoway risks being merely an expensive box-tick, attracting the usual crowd and leaving everyone else unaware that Scottish Opera has been in town.

I caught Scottish opera's touring *Elixir* twice: a downbeat performance in an overheated hall in Ullapool, and a much jollier event in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis. Both were vocally excellent, musically considered and elegant, though the band could have used a couple more strings, and Oliver Platt's staging was pretty superficial – perhaps a necessity of the 'one-size-fits-all' nature of a show that needs to work in village halls, community centres and even the occasional 'proper' theatre. At 15 quid a head, though, nobody was complaining.

A dina and Nemorino, the two romantic leads in *The Elixir of Love*, were sung by Ellie Laugharne and Elgan Llyr ▶

▼ On the bus: the cast and crew of Scottish Opera's autumn tour take to the high road



JOHN MACLEAN



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▲ Casting call: Elgan Llyr Thomas, James Cleverton, Toby Girling, Hazel McBain and Ellie Laugharne among the standing stones of Callanish on the Isle of Lewis

◀ Thomas. I asked them how they found themselves at this point in their career and what the experience of touring meant for them. 'I've had some lovely roles at Opera Holland Park,' Ellie told me, 'and I sang Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro* a couple of times on the Glyndebourne tour; but this tour is a real event. It's wonderful to have Stuart conducting, though a bit scary too – there's nowhere to hide in a performance this size. I'm loving the camaraderie – usually singers and instrumental players go their ways after the show but here we're all in it together. We're only on the road for a month, but it gives a new dynamic to the show and the relationships. Probably that has a good effect on the performances too – I hope so.'

The slow-burn intensity of the touring schedule – with performances more or less every other night over the course of more than a month – means that the cast has a lot of time to get to get under the skin of the roles they are singing. Ellie enthuses: 'Adina's an interesting character – such a snob, keeping up appearances, trying to ignore her real feelings. I enjoy Oliver Platt's staging – it can be a bit cramped in some of the venues, but it's very inventive in the way it makes Belcore's platoon work.' Next summer, you can catch Ellie at a fixed address: Opera Holland Park singing Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*.

Elgan Llyr Thomas, meanwhile, is used to remote, windswept countryside from his roots in Wales. 'When I was growing up in

Llandudno I always wanted to be an actor. The first opera I saw was *Falstaff* with Bryn Terfel, when Welsh National Opera came to town – not a bad way to start! I took singing lessons because I needed another instrument for A Level music, and then someone suggested I should audition for music college... Somehow I'd never really realised that opera could bring singing and acting together, but then it clicked.'

Is bel canto opera Elgan's bag, I wonder? Plenty of tenors are making major careers in Donizetti and Rossini roles. 'I'm not really sure where my voice will end up,' he says. 'I feel right singing lighter Verdi roles at the moment. Nemorino is a long sing but not too high – the highest written note's an A-flat. I really want to make him not a complete dork! He's got a real power of sincerity and innocence.'

Has the experience of touring with Scottish Opera given him some useful insights? 'Touring feels very physical – the costume is pretty heavy and in Ullapool I was pouring with sweat; it's a big stamina job. But it's a lot of fun on the road and we're certainly seeing some lovely places.'

Elan is on Scottish Opera's Emerging Artists programme until March, and coming up next is a role in Philip Glass' *The Trial*. Following that, he's on the road again with a tour of opera highlights. 'Then, I'm open to offers!'

It feels rather romantic up here in the Highland expanses, driving through the wilderness of mountains and lochs from Inverness to Ullapool, and looking forward to the even more exotic and

▼ Scottish Opera's new music director Stuart Stratford has big plans to reinvigorate the company



JAMES GROSSOP



TIM MORRIZZO

▲ Show down: Toby Girling as Belcore and Ellie Laugharne as Adina

mythical Hebrides, but there is a curious reticence around these opera gigs: no posters, no fanfare, no hint that Stuart Stratford's presence is really quite a big thing. Modesty is admirable, of course, but opera needs to impose itself, do more than play to dwindling, elderly audiences. This is the lesson of English Touring Opera, who hold residencies lasting several days in various towns and take a long-term approach to developing the audience. Stratford did take the chance of working in the local school in Ullapool, where the company presented children with a couple of scenes from the *Elixir*. He's keen to do more of this, which must be right – though it needs to be done systematically.

These tours encourage an *esprit de corps* that reminds me of J B Priestley's marvellous 1929 book *The Good Companions*, recording the picaresque fortunes of a touring concert party. The usual distinctions and hierarchies fade away: the MD hobnobs with the techies, violinists and sopranos eat and drink together and, in what may well be a first for Stornoway, there's an impromptu game of cricket. There on the sloping lawns beneath Victorian-Gothic Lews Castle, most of the cast plus Maggie the viola player and Claire the marketing officer grapple with the willow and the wicket. The

► 'On tour, the usual hierarchies fade away': Stuart Stratford (right) rubs shoulders with *Opera Now's* intrepid correspondent Robert Thicknesse

match is notable mostly for its mixture of intense competition, varying competence and Sergeant Belcore taking a memorable purler in the boggy outfield. Bonding continued over the odd half of shandy in the local pub, a trip to the standing stones of Callanish and a general air of massive banter – though as far as I know nobody dared try the chippy's enticing speciality of 'a yard of slush'. [ON](#)



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