

Bosnian Opera: The music of war

A remarkable project in Mostar aims to bring about reconciliation in Bosnia through the country's shared cultural heritage. Jessica Duchen sees the work taking shape before its performances in the UK

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The Bosnian midsummer air felt humid and oppressive when I arrived at Mostar's National Theatre for the world premiere of Nigel Osborne's opera, *Differences in Demolition*. The theatre's concrete façade is riddled with the marks of shelling. Across the road, a Habsburg mansion is in ruins. Five minutes away, near the famous bridge, a sign by the road instructs: Don't Forget.

Differences in Demolition, which opens tomorrow as part of the City of London Festival, taps into the troubled history and musical traditions of Bosnia-Herzegovina in a way that feels entirely organic. It's an intimate chamber opera - five singers, six instrumentalists - but its emotional scale is substantial. A blend of allegory and reality, the story touches on deep threads in this traumatised community, at one mythologised remove. The music is derived from "sevdah", the haunting folk music of Bosnia and the Balkans; but it's anything but a superficial appropriation of local style, instead bearing witness to its composer's passionate involvement with Bosnia across 17 years.

The libretto is by the Bosnian poet Goran Simic, and opens with part of his poem of the same title: the ironic tale of a migrant worker who has demolished houses in his own country, then arrives in another as a builder. From this starting point, the protagonist, Hasan, is transformed into one of his own forefathers. The ancestral Hasan is one of three brothers. One brother departs, determined to become rich; the next goes too, intending to be a hero. The servant girl, Sevdah, is in love with Hasan, but leaves, promising to return. Hasan stays, and waits.

Time passes; the first brother returns aged, regretting the youth he squandered making money. The second comes back as a war criminal, destroyed by his conscience. Sevdah reappears, disguised, but Hasan does not recognise her until it's too late.

Osborne, Reid Professor of Music at Edinburgh University, and Simic, one of the former Yugoslavia's greatest writers, are old friends and collaborators; they first met during the siege of Sarajevo. Here, Osborne says, their friendship was "forged in fire". While others were desperate to get out of the town, Osborne risked death to get in. Simic, a Bosnian Serb, had decided to stay, making a stand for a united, multicultural Bosnia. Life was a daily struggle for survival, without water or electricity, and they began their first joint project while, as Simic remembers, "the temperature was many minuses and we were working under candlelight with blankets".

Sarajevo before the war, Simic says, "was ideal; nobody cared what your background was. It was a form of unity within diversity." In this peaceful melting pot, Serbs, Croats and Muslims used to intermarry without concern. "I didn't want someone to tell me there was a difference between a pear and an apple," Simic recounts. "I didn't want to let anyone kick me out of my town; I wanted to stay with my people of different nationalities." He lost many close relatives in the war and his family home was completely destroyed.

Simic now divides his time between Toronto and Sarajevo. "It's happening all over the world that some people don't care for their own country and go to build some other countries, instead of improving our own," he says, reflecting on the opera's story. "This opera is a message to those people, and to myself."

The legacy of pain, loss and hope constantly underpins *Differences in Demolition*. Its music mingles modernism with a series of radiantly beautiful arias and ensembles, yet the juxtaposition feels remarkably natural. Osborne has achieved this by basing all the musical material on the same technical resources drawn from *sevdah* – the characteristic asymmetric rhythms and the "octatonic" scale.

Sevdah bears the stamp of virtually every musical element in the Balkans: the music of Turkey, the Middle East, Dalmatia, Hungary, the Roma, Sephardic traditions and more blend into a force that speaks perpetually of longing, love and empathy, and that also represents a unification of culture in the region. Essentially, Osborne has assimilated the style and created something new from and for it. He compares the principle to Bartók's application of folk styles.

Mostar is a divided city. East Mostar, primarily Muslim, encompasses the old town, teeming with cafés and bars. To the west lies the Croat, Catholic area – modern, much restored and fully commercialised. Many speak of an "invisible wall" that seems to divide the communities of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Perhaps the rest of the world reckons that, 12 years after the Dayton Agreement, Bosnia-Herzegovina is "all right". It isn't. There's no street in East Mostar that does not bear a reminder of the war. Walking through the town, one senses sapped energy, an atmosphere of exhausted helplessness. The once-famous Neretva Hotel is a wreck; nearby, amputees join their friends in the cafés, while souvenir stalls sell pens fashioned from the shells that destroyed the city.

Music is not a luxury here. During the Sarajevo siege, observing traumatised children, some of whom were left unable to speak, Osborne became deeply committed to the idea of music as a means of aiding their recovery. So successful were his initial efforts in community music that the idea spiralled. In 1997, the Pavarotti Centre in Mostar opened its doors, spearheaded by an international team of supporters, providing a home for clinical music therapy and community outreach projects. It still offers the only clinical programme of its kind in the world, specialising in work with war-damaged children and post-traumatic stress disorder. Tragically, its entire music therapy programme is currently threatened with closure due to lack of funds.

Perhaps the new opera will act as a reminder of the power of music as a unifying, healing force. Both Osborne and Simic had been nervous about how their creation might be received by the local audience in Mostar. But within seconds of the end, the whole theatre was on its feet, cheering. Like *sevdah*, the opera has heart and soul, not merely technique, and it had struck a chord that's profound and true.

Opera Circus performs '*Differences in Demolition*' at Wilton's Music Hall as part of the City of London Festival (0845 120 7502) on 10, 11 and 12 July