

Arias and Austen in an ambitious mix

A new operatic version of *Mansfield Park* is setting off on a tour of the country's stately homes. Jessica Duchon reports

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Off the beaten track, in the stately homes of northern England, a small opera company is daring to think big. Heritage Opera, based in Staffordshire, is about to give the world premiere of an opera based on Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, which has been written by one of Britain's finest music-theatre composers, Jonathan Dove.

The intimate scale of the enterprise might have pleased Austen, who once referred to "the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush". Involving just 10 singers and piano-duet accompaniment, the opera has been conceived for performance in country houses. This has been the speciality of Heritage Opera since it was founded, in 2006, by its musical director, Chris Gill. Commissioning Dove was ambitious; his *Flight*, created for Glyndebourne in 1998, has been staged on three continents; his *The Adventures of Pinocchio* for Opera North was a more recent hit. Yet Heritage Opera has enabled Dove to fulfil a dream.

"The idea for *Mansfield Park* goes back a long way," says Dove. "When I first read it, more than 20 years ago, I remember hearing music and feeling that it wanted to become something. At that time there was another company that used to tour stately homes doing blockbuster opera repertoire with piano; it went through my mind at the time that that would be the perfect way of doing *Mansfield Park*. I've never thought it would be right for a larger opera house."

Austen fans will be familiar with the story of Fanny Price, a poor relation in a grand house, in love with the family's second son, Edmund, and watching helplessly as he is dazzled by the sophisticated Mary Crawford. Scandal, heartbreak and stargazing all have their places in the tale. "It's just like *Cinderella*," says Dove. His librettist, Alasdair Middleton, has framed each scene with a sung "chapter" heading and retained Austen's words where possible.

Would *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma*, with more extrovert characters, hold more appeal? "I heard music in *Mansfield Park* in a way I hadn't with the others," says Dove. "It's the way *Fanny Price* is written. Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse are delightful and fantastic characters, but I never felt there was anything that I needed to add to that. With *Fanny*, we sense her suffering, but she's never explicit – she never says to Edmund, 'Stay away from Mary Crawford.' It's what she's not saying that provokes the music."

Dove has not attempted to create a pastiche of the music of Austen's day. "The score doesn't strictly behave like early 19th-century music, but I hope it suggests that era," he says. "The accompaniment is for four hands at one piano, a medium that Austen would have heard often."

Sarah Helsby Hughes, HO's artistic director, who sings the role of Mary Crawford, says: "The music for *Fanny* is gorgeous, extremely haunting and touching. Mrs Norris is very cleverly done, with spiky writing that's her to a T. And for the conversation between Mary and her brother, Henry, [Dove has] created an urbane, almost jazzy, city-gloss idiom that's different from any of the other characters' music: it tells us that these are city slickers in the country."

What will hardened Austen fans make of a *Mansfield Park* opera? Tim Bullamore, publisher of *Jane Austen's Regency World*, says: "The 'Janeites' are absolutely devoted. They'll go round the world, they'll go to conferences, they dress up – recently I saw 100 of them walking through Bath in regency costume. That's especially popular with Americans – I think this opera should cross the Atlantic really well."

Mansfield Park has a special sensibility (and perhaps sense, too). Dove's version may start out on a piece of operatic ivory. But I suspect this will not be the last we hear of it.

'Mansfield Park', Boughton House, Northamptonshire
(www.heritageopera.co.uk) 30 July; then touring to 11 August