

Preview: Gothic Opera

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Gothic Opera, a new London-based opera company, is launching this Halloween with a production of Der Vampyr by Heinrich Marschner. The company was founded by sopranos Béatrice de Larragoiti, Charlotte Osborn and Alice Usher, who met at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance. Alice Usher, company director, tells Opera Now about the motivations behind this unique new operatic enterprise

The seed of the Gothic Opera dream was planted four years ago during a student-led Trinity Laban project, in which a group of students performed the first chorus from Marschner's *Der Vampyr*. Béatrice, our Artistic Director, then began to create programmes around Gothic themes, performing them in candlelit concerts.

As young sopranos beginning our careers in competitive London, Béatrice, our co-founder Charlotte and I were always searching for new projects to be involved in, and between us had accumulated quite a bit of 'behind the scenes' experience. This year Charlotte brought us together and the pieces fell into place to begin a venture of our own.

Gothic stories are intense, emotional and atmospheric. Since the 19th century composers have found that Gothic tales lend themselves perfectly to opera, but as far as we know, no company has specialised in performing Gothic operas before. The three of us love being able to combine all our passions into this unique project.

For me, the Gothic ties in with my former English literature studies, during which I learnt about the flourishing of dark, fantastical literature around the 'year without a summer' (1816). Béatrice is also devoted to Gothic literature and has a background in Art History, which sparked her passion for the Gothic aesthetic. And we are not alone: one thing we have learnt since launching Gothic Opera is that the eerie atmosphere of the Gothic appeals to people, including those who have little previous experience of opera.



Founders of Gothic Opera (l-r): Béatrice de Larragoiti, Alice Usher, Charlotte Osborn. (Photo credit: Nick Rutter)

A key aim of our company is to bring rarely performed operas to life, staging them in their entirety and revealing their special character. We want to open up these thrilling, rich stories to new opera audiences, reflecting the appeal that such stories already have on screen. We are also aware of the competitiveness of the opera world today and the challenges facing young artists, so we want to give singers, directors, conductors and instrumentalists the opportunity to be part of something different.

We have chosen to launch with *Der Vampyr* because it goes straight to the heart of the Gothic genre. It has its origins in the short story *The Vampyre*, written in 1819 by John William Polidori. The story was initially sketched by Lord Byron in the summer of 1816, during which both writers, alongside Percy Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft, stayed on the banks of Lake Geneva in Switzerland. *The Vampyre* was one of the first European examples of the vampire story, which continues to have enduring appeal to this day. Musically, we found that Marschner's opera is rich and accessible, and the story is pacy and exciting. The three soprano roles suited the characters of our voices well.

The question of gender roles in Gothic works is very important for us. In many Gothic stories, as in many operas, gender roles are antiquated. We are committed

to exploring and analysing portrayals of female characters in a way that sheds light on the agency, intelligence and motivations of those traditionally considered ‘victims’. Gothic stories contain multitudes of such characters, and they can be continually re-read and explored throughout the ages. Our productions will highlight that the company is positioned at the intersection between the 19th-century mindset and the modern eye. We celebrate the character and traditions of the Gothic, but also, through intentional shifts in perspective, question the sexualised nature of violence against women that lies in the heart of some of these works.

Another central aim of Gothic Opera is to use unusual and characterful spaces to assist the scene-setting for our productions: we see the venues almost as additional characters. For our performances of *Der Vampyr* we will be taking advantage of ecclesiastical features and dark, spooky corners. Our singers are prepared to be flexible and we want our audiences to be immersed in the story as it unfolds around them. We are very interested in the Brunel Tunnel Shaft in Rotherhithe (London) for future productions...

There is a good chance our next show will be French: *La Nonne sanglante* by Gounod and *Les Trois baisers du Diable* by Offenbach are high on the list. Our core repertoire lies in the 19th century but we are exploring more modern repertoire too. We are also planning a devised piece with excerpts from various operas.

We intend to stage a main show every Halloween, the spookiest time of year! People often look for interesting and alternative Halloween plans, so we think there is potential here to draw in an audience. We would also like to offer more experimental summer festival productions. Our plans are evolving daily!

We were delighted with the success of our crowdfunding campaign for *Der Vampyr*, and hugely grateful to all those who contributed to get our company off the ground. We intend to fund Gothic Opera with a combination of grants and donors before seeking charitable status next year.

Performance details for Gothic Opera’s production of Der Vampyr are as follows:

Old Church, Stoke Newington

31 October, 7:30pm

1 November, 7:30pm

Asylum Chapel, Peckham

3 November, 5:00pm

gothicopera.co.uk