

DUAL PURPOSE

Composer Michael Berkeley and novelist Ian McEwan have collaborated on *For You*, a new opera. But who called the shots? Ashutosh Khandekar meets them to discuss the problems of marrying words and music

PHOTOGRAPHY: LOUISE BROOM

Michael Berkeley and Ian McEwan have been friends for almost 30 years. Although both highly successful creative artists, they have only collaborated once before, 26 years ago, on an anti-war oratorio *Or Shall We Die?*, which will be performed in Cardiff this May as part of the composer's 60th birthday celebrations. The two are preparing to unveil their new opera, *For You*, to be given its world premiere by Music Theatre Wales at the Hay Festival. This will be Berkeley's third opera, following in the wake of *Baa-baa Black Sheep*, based on a novella by Rudyard Kipling, and *Jane Eyre*. McEwan, meanwhile, is making his first foray into opera, though *For You* picks up several themes – secrets, lies, sex and obsessive love – that will be familiar from his hugely popular novels which include *Enduring Love*, *Atonement* and recently, *On Chesil Beach*.

The bittersweet plot of *For You* follows the damaged lives of an ageing composer/conductor, Charles, and his wife Antonia as their marriage unravels through a series of betrayals. The couple are embroiled in a fateful *ménage à six* involving a nubile horn player, a doctor, a Polish maid and a gay secretary. The opera's title is ironic in that all the characters act more out of selfishness than generosity. The plot has its comic moments that border on bedroom farce; but there are also poignant shifts to a much darker,

tragic mood. The work ends with Charles pouring out his soul as he conducts his latest symphony, the climax of his creative career.

Ash Khandekar (AK): Charles, the opera's principal character, is a composer, which is bound to seem self-referential in the case of Michael. Was it difficult to write music for a character who himself writes music?

Michael Berkeley (MB): I don't think you feel it's self-referential when you hear the music. I've kept my own musical voice rather separate from Charles's though inevitably

'We went on several long walks together where we worked on the opera's plot'

the two get entangled occasionally. For example, there's a scene where Charles looks back nostalgically at the music of his youth, and I've quoted from my own youthful oboe concerto at that moment. The point is that I had to create a musical voice for Charles that says something about his character and that fits into the organic whole of the opera.

Ian McEwan (IM): I found it irresistible to write a story about a composer, because I find the act of composing such an interesting



WORK IN PROGRESS: Michael Berkeley and Ian McEwan at the composer's London home

metaphor for creativity in its purest sense. Having said that, the main character is nothing like Michael and I didn't really ask Michael what it was like to be a composer. I wanted to explore the world of a creative obsessive and the way people are mesmerised by the power of that sort of genius.

AK: The language of the libretto is very terse and contemporary, but it has clear references to the Mozart/Da Ponte operas in its interaction between servants and masters, in the twists and turns of the



plot, and in its rather cynical yet tender exploration of love.

MB: Yes, there's a lot of Mozart in this, though I hesitate to mention anything so sublime in this context. We wanted the piece to be about human behaviour, its foibles and deceptions and what can happen as a result of those things. There's almost a *Don Giovanni*-like conclusion to the opera.

IM: One thing I took from the classics is the ensemble pieces. It was good to write sextets. I love *The Barber of Seville* and we were very keen to have ensembles that grew

in complexity, where all the characters end up expressing themselves at once. I'm always amazed at how opera can do this – it's unique in that respect, but it's something I haven't heard very much in contemporary opera.

MB: I'll tell you why, it's because it's bloody difficult to do!

AK: So back to the basics. Which did come first: words or music? This is an original story, so presumably it all had to come out of Ian's head first before Michael could add his musical voice...

IM: Actually, it was more collaborative than that. Our starting point was that we wanted to explore the idea of sexual obsession. We went on several quite long walks where we worked on the opera's plot, and we gave each other things to read that might have the kernel of a character in them. I listened to Michael and he listened to me. Simple as that!

MB: I never felt that I was being given a *fait accompli* which I then had to go away and set to music. One of the great things about working with a writer on an original libretto is that it unfolds as you go along. Ian would feed ►

me the text as he wrote it and I would play back to him what I'd done with it. He then used that as a reference point for what was coming next. So that meant that the music itself was integral to the narrative.

AK: No artistic tears and tantrums to report, then?

MB: Neither of us are natural conflict mongers – after all, our first collaboration was about the evils of warfare, you may recall! We work with an intellectual understanding that is mutual. There were little things that we smoothed out by talking about them.

AK: There's quite a graphic sex scene that could be tricky to stage. Sex in opera can be cringe-makingly embarrassing.

IM: Actually, although the opera is infused

WORDS AND MUSIC IMPERFECT MARRIAGES



GILBERT (R) AND SULLIVAN (L): often at odds...

NOT ALL LITERARY musical partnerships run smoothly. Richard Strauss's collaboration with poet and dramatist Hugo von Hofmannsthal was one of the most fruitful in opera, lasting over 20 years and resulting in a string of masterpieces. Relations between the two, however, were often stressful: the pragmatic Strauss tended to be irritated by Hofmannsthal's dandyish pretensions. They corresponded regularly and frankly, but rarely met, in spite of living nearby. In one letter, the aesthetically inclined librettist accuses the composer of 'diametrical anti-comprehension of what I have tried to do'.

Gilbert and Sullivan present a rare case of a librettist sharing equal billing with a composer, but the two often quarrelled about the relative value of their contribution to the partnership. The meticulous, self-disciplined Gilbert was frequently exasperated by the charming, laid back Sullivan. Although their comic operas brought them enduring fame and fortune, each wanted to prove their credentials independently as 'serious' artists. Neither succeeded.

GETTY



with sexual intrigue, the sex scene itself is really a piece of situation comedy. It's climax is interrupted as all the characters file on stage one by one – another Rossinian moment which I loved writing. In terms of the performance of Charles's manhood, is this the first operatic 'no-show', Michael?

MB: I need to give that some thought! But seriously, it strikes me that so many contemporary operas don't explore the tension between comedy and tragedy enough. You can only have real blackness if it comes after a flash of light, and music can deliver this sort of abrupt contrast supremely well in conjunction with words. Ian writes very precisely, and I needed to negotiate the shift of musical mood from comic to tragic equally accurately, which was a real discipline. Again, Mozart provided some inspiration here.

AK: Ian's novels contain some breathtaking descriptive writing, such as the portrayal

Ian McEwan: 'Writing this libretto had me looking up to Shakespeare'

of military life during World War II in *Atonement*. An opera libretto, however, is based on inner monologue and dialogue. Was it difficult to pare down your writing to these basics?

IM: I rather enjoyed it actually. Michael talked about the inspiration of Mozart, and for me, writing this libretto had me looking up to Shakespeare. It made me realise how powerful the iambic pentameter is. Sometimes I'd find I'd written five of them in a row without realising it! The libretto isn't poetry, but I became very aware of my



DUAL CONTROLS: 'I listened to Michael and he listened to me,' says Ian McEwan

audiences are so used to engaging with opera through surtitles, that they've just become a normal part of the interaction between music and words

MB: I think you've also got to bear in mind that Music Theatre Wales is a pioneering company that goes around the country introducing new work to places that are often rather unprovided for when it comes to opera. Anything that gives audiences a chance to engage with a new work, with a new libretto and a psychologically complex plot has to be seriously considered.

AK: What are your hopes for this work? New operas don't exactly have a good track record of surviving as repertoire pieces.

MB: I've been lucky – *Jane Eyre* has been taken up into the repertoire, with productions in Australia and the US after the British premiere; and *For You* is going to be developed into a larger version which is being performed in Germany and Switzerland. I think actually we're living in a bit of a golden period for new opera

in Britain at the moment. The Barbican has just celebrated Judith Weir, Harry's [Harrison Birtwistle] got a new opera being premiered at the Royal Opera House, *The Minotaur*. George Benjamin, James MacMillan and Jonathan Dove have all had major world premieres recently. So it's not a case of doom and gloom – far from it.

AK: Will there be other collaborations between the two of you in the near future or will we have to wait another 25 years?

IM: There are all sorts of possibilities of course. I couldn't sustain myself as a librettist, though it has been artistically rewarding and the collaboration is great. I've written screenplays, and in the ranking of things, I'd say a scriptwriter is as a Corporal to a librettist's General.

MB: ...and The Author?

IM: Oh, The Author is god! ■

inner ear and its sensitivity to what you might call 'sprung rhythm'. Basically, it's measured prose. I didn't try to think about what Michael would do with it musically, but I did imagine breathing the phrases.

MB: I actually found Ian's words very powerful to set. The language has a stark intensity and even the shortest phrases pack a lot of meaning. The libretto is not like one of Ian's novels. The thing about opera is that it's all delivered with a degree of hyperbole. The emotions are heightened. A lot of dramatic things happen in a short space of time.

AK: You pushed hard for the opera to be performed with English surtitles – especially Ian. Is this an admission that the text in opera tends to be lost at the expense of the music? Or just that singers are bad at projecting words?

IM: This is psychological drama as well as music theatre. And I think these days



'FOR YOU': TOUR 2008

For You receives its world premiere at Theatr Brycheiniog, Brecon on Saturday, 31 May, (with a second performance on Sunday, 1 June) as part of The Guardian Hay Festival. It is then followed by a national tour, details of which are below:

SPRING TOUR

Clwyd Theatr Cymru Mold:

Thursday 5 June

Oxford Playhouse:

Thursday 19 June

Birmingham Repertory Theatre:

Saturday 19 July

Aberystwyth MusicFest:

Thursday 31 July

AUTUMN TOUR

Linbury Theatre, ROH:

Tuesday 28 October,

Thursday 30 October

Saturday 1 November; dates tba

New Theatre, Cardiff:

Sunday 2 November

Gala Theatre, Durham:

Monday 24 November

For further information contact:

www.musictheatrewales.org.uk