

Luigi Dallapiccola put it best. In opera, he wrote, “the almost unattainable prize is perfection.” A symphonic concert, if carefully rehearsed, will always stand a better chance of success than an opera. It’s a persuasive argument. The fact opera has so many variables, musical and dramaturgical, goes a long way to explain its allure, but a failure of any one of them—lighting, costume, scenery, direction, gesture, narrative, text, not to mention the music—can instantly blight a performance. “All this, each evening, amounts to a game of chance.”

The genre of opera has moved on a great deal but the Italian’s words hold true. If one opera is a high-wire act, then over 100 performances of 40 new operas in just three summer weeks is truly audacious. That’s the feat of the Tête à Tête Opera Festival (www.tete-a-tete.org.uk), billed as the world’s largest festival of new opera and sited in venues, streets and public spaces in and around London’s vibrant King’s Cross district.

Curated by Bill Bankes-Jones, the festival this year featured the music of several BASCA members: Shirley Thompson’s *Sacred Mountain*, Tim Benjamin’s Radius-produced double bill of one-act operas *Life Stories*, Jocelyn Pook’s *Hearing Voices*, Edward Lambert’s *Opera with a Title*, Michael Betteridge’s *Thousand Furs*, and *The Franklin Effect*, the fruits of a collaboration between Frances-Hoad, Thompson, Lynne Plowman, and other female composers and scientists. Frances-Hoad is effusive about Tête à Tête’s uniqueness and the opportunities it provides:

“Tête à Tête has been really wonderful for me, and had a big part in my development as a composer of operatic works. What’s so amazing is its openness to ideas—for instance, the soprano Natalie Raybould and I were able to get funding for writing and performing our work-in-progress from the RVW Trust [www.rvwtrust.org.uk] because we had a performance date. This was very important at the time as I was in between ‘composer-in-residence’ jobs, so the money side was really vital!”

Tête à Tête takes a novel approach to the sort of issue Dallapiccola raised over half a century ago. It offers a forgiving setting to musicians, from scratch performances and works-in-progress to complete operas. If opera is one of the acid tests of a composer’s career, Tête à Tête is the ideal laboratory, encouraging composers to consider what it is both to write an opera and to have it performed. This link between composition and the promise of performance is valuable enough; so too is the cue for self-reflection, given how diverse this century’s ‘opera’ can be.

Betteridge, for example, describes *Thousand Furs* as an “actor-musician” or “singer-instrumentalist” opera, in which a cast of six also supply the orchestral accompaniment. While the story charts Cinderella’s murkier and altogether darker ancestor, the operatic set-up evokes memories of Arnold Schoenberg’s mixed-ensemble melodrama *Pierrot lunaire*, now over a century old.

Composers and enlightened audiences have long understood how the lines between music theatre, opera and musical plays have been blurred in these ways. Never has this been truer than in Tête à Tête’s blend of concerts, street performances, pop-up operas and club nights.

Changing ideas on what constitutes an opera can have further consequences for their composers. Thompson and Benjamin are examples of how the modern role of ‘composer’ can encompass producer, director and even librettist, too. Betteridge,

likewise, often produces his own work, though always works with a director and librettist—Katharine Armitage for *Thousand Furs*.

Composers of opera will forever need to liaise with specialists to shape a successful performance. Indeed, *Thousand Furs* was the first-ever commission by the music theatre ensemble Re:Sound, who secured the time and space needed for the collaboration through Aldeburgh Music's artist-led Open Space scheme (www.aldeburgh.co.uk/residencies/open_space). Betteridge explains:

"We had a workshop of fifteen minutes of the material in April to explore how far the actor-musician model could be pushed. This July and August I was lucky enough to be at over half the rehearsals and my thoughts and comments were welcomed. I even wrote an extra bit of music and modified some vocal lines. The very collaborative environment was greatly appreciated, considering how challenging putting an opera like this together is."

Opera composers will sympathise. At some point in their career, every composer will have struggled to see the wood for the trees. Writing and managing an opera, the most multivalent art form, is an acute case. Sensitivity to text and large-scale structure are just two areas, musically speaking, that audiences and critics are generally quick to judge. Learning from collaborators, then, in particular finding a librettist to place your confidence in, is vital. "The practicalities of setting text to music aren't limited to textbooks" is Frances-Hoad's sage advice.

Another pointer is to understand that any music performed in an explicitly dramatic setting—opera, ballet, musicals, musical plays and so on—isn't governed by mechanical or performing copyright, but by "grand" rights. Performances must therefore be licensed by the publisher of the work, rather than by PRS for Music.

The aspiring opera composer would surely do well to weigh the ambition and idealism of Dallapiccola against the platform for risk-taking of the type Tête à Tête Opera Festival grants. Embrace chance, be pragmatic and, above all, take the long view. After her first Tête à Tête outing, Frances-Hoad went on to write a full-length opera, *Amy's Last Dive*, in association with the 2012 Cultural Olympiad: "Without Tête à Tête's open, encouraging approach, I doubt I'd have got that far."

Besides the RVW Trust and Open Space residency, several schemes support aspiring and established opera composers: Flourish is the name given to OperaUpClose's new opera writing competition, now in its fourth year (www.operaupclose.com/flourish); Aldeburgh Music's Jerwood Opera Writing Programme exists for first-time writers of opera (www.aldeburgh.co.uk/jerwood); Help Musicians UK (www.helpmusicians.org.uk), the working name of the better-known the Musicians Benevolent Fund since 2013, and the national Arts Councils (www.artscouncil.org.uk, www.artswales.org.uk, www.creativescotland.com, www.artscouncil-ni.org) can also provide support.