The Guardian

Lubaina Himid photographed at her home in Preston. Photograph: Antonio Olmos/The Observer

Lubaina Himid: 'I love opera because it's the way I experience life'

My Viennese stepfather introduced me to opera via his newly acquired cassette player in the very early 1970s. We listened to The Magic Flute and marvelled at the Queen of the Night. I imagined what she might look like and found immense pleasure conjuring the forest, the beasts and the endless tasks in my head. From then onwards I began to be interested in this magic art multi-layered form. At art school, studying theatre design, operas were almost always given to us to complete as our monthly assignments. I listened to and learned very quickly to love them, though my skills in design never really blossomed in the direction or to the degree that the tutors had dreamed of. The Magic Flute, Norma, Dido and Aeneus, The Rake's Progress, Don Pasquale, Rigoletto, Fidelio and, of course, Der Rosenkavalier have stayed with me for decades, floating in and out of my studios, my bathrooms and bedrooms on vinyl, cassette, compact disc and car radios. These performances were almost always experienced privately and not in public at the opera house.

When I began the paintings for Glyndebourne, I thought about the immense, multi-coloured sounds and at the same time the broken, seductive, powerful and sometimes hilarious human bodies. On the canvases you can find delicate hands, straining penises, disconnected hearts, floating brains, severed necks and pursed lips. Through this work, I embarked on the next stage of my adventure to find out what love actually sounds like.

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Don Giovanni (2023) © Lubaina Himid. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

Mozart's opera is not really about revenge - it is not really a warning. Although Don Giovanni is punished, centuries later he is still a hero. Let's face it! The music is quite incredible in its drama and immensity and the plot is actually highly believable, in which rape, attempted rape, brutal murder, constant lies and mean-spirited gaslighting dominate the action. The smell is of sweat, alcohol and finally roasting flesh. At the centre of it all, with a starring role, is an off-stage penis attached to an onstage hero - again.
Don Giovanni is at Glyndebourne until 15 July

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L'elisir d'amore (2023). © Lubaina Himid. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

I love Donizetti's Don Pasquale and have listened to its hilarious plot on and off for years, but had never encountered L'elisir d'amore and its extreme silliness based around love potions (alcohol), delusion (drunkenness) and, of course, money. It was impossible to care about these people or their ridiculous ideas about love and partnership, but the fabulous songs just kept giving me pleasure nonetheless, as did imagining what went on inside the head of the inimitable Dulcamara; the ultimate quack. The painted hearts in all their cartoon glory bob about among the bottles trying to look real but failing happily.

L'elisir d'amore is at Glyndebourne until 9 July

Dialogues des Carmelites (2023) © Lubaina Himid. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

It's always been impossible not to be gripped by the underlying fear, the constant arguments, the flickering anger and tragic desperation coursing through the veins of Poulenc's opera. Discussions go back and forth swooping around impossible safety, inevitable danger, even more inevitable death and the weight of a lifetime of duty. Years ago, I was completely surprised by my own wild thrill at the sound of the guillotine as each nun was murdered one after the other. The clean slice, the low thud and the slow imagined buildup on the ground of spilt blood, spent tears, severed necks, pale heads and limp forms. Every time I listen to the opera, the twisted, broken, slashed and silent throats of the dead haunt me while seeming bizarrely and scarily funny.

Dialogues des Carmélites is at Glyndebourne from 10 June to 29 July

A Midsummer Night's Dream © Lubaina Himid. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

There is darkness everywhere in Britten's opera, which of course means chaos and anarchy are bound to follow. I am not a rural person so the idea of a lightless location coupled with an enchanted forest is way out of my calm zone. Magical is all very well but when that means dysfunctionality and mayhem, I am not happy. Stereotypically idiotic workmen with buckets and brooms, masks, making fun of well-known opera singers isn't that funny, narcissistic poetry about the nature of love, a skyline devoid of buildings but full of stars is beautiful yet somehow cheesy. Slightly hopeless heterosexual lovers, bickering, mean-spirited faeries and blokey rustics all made me laugh, but also forced me into a place of cynical distance. Listening to the music was wonderful, especially as I didn't know it well, but the painting I have made, with its empty bucket showing off its painted brain, floating about in among a flurry of lost leaves illustrates the feeling of upside down exasperation the opera left me with.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is at Glyndebourne 1 July to 22 August

Semele (2023) © Lubaina Himid. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

Another fabulous celebration of swift and powerful brutality. This time it's woman-on-woman violence and revenge for vanity and adultery. Listening to the delicious and seductive songs while ironing and working long hours on the painting itself was the most splendid way to spend time. It made up for the fact that all these paintings were made in the late autumn months in the north of England where the days are dark and short. A huge ceramic bowl made from fluffy clouds and kissing lips was the only container available for all the inevitable terror lurking lightly beneath the surface of this "comedy" of desire and violence.

Semele is at Glyndebourne 23 July to 26 August

The Rake's Progress © Lubaina Himid. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

My longstanding relationship with The Rake's Progress centres on three men. A deep knowledge of Hogarth, his dynamic engravings and his theatrical painting series as well as his work with the Foundling Hospital have influenced my practice for over 40 years. The gesturing hands in the painting are a borrowing from Hogarth, playfully lifted and altered. A rather sketchy understanding of Stravinsky stems from an encounter with a performance at Glyndebourne in the early 1980s. I remember making an early painted wooden cut-out of the composer looking rather bad-tempered in an open-necked shirt which I made during the mid-1970s. I didn't know then how much I would eventually love his music. David Hockney was a childhood hero and his Rake's Progress engravings from the 1960s were, in their awkward, scratchy, fragile way, something wonderful to aspire to. Seeing his set and costume designs much later on stage and in the flesh - only yards from my seat in such a small opera house - was therefore doubly exciting, both intimate and astonishing.
The Rake's Progress is at Glyndebourne 4-27 August

● An exhibition of Lubaina Himid's large-scale paintings and objects in response to the operas in this year's festival is at Glyndebourne opera house this summer.

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