

Lumiere update

Danny Vavrečka is at Glyndebourne for three months

As I write this, I'm sat in the circle of the beautiful auditorium at Glyndebourne, reflecting on my first few months as this year's Lumière. The production desks have been moved up here from the stalls, and today is the final dress rehearsal for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It seems extraordinary to believe that for the past few months, this view has been part of my typical day. The Lumière scheme is a six-month development opportunity for early-career lighting practitioners, created by lighting designer Peter Mumford. I have been partnered as an assistant with four different lighting designers during my time here, and these three months form the first part of the scheme.

My first opera at Glyndebourne was a new production of *Don Giovanni*, with lighting designed by Bernd Purkrabek. I was secretly hoping for a gentle start on my first day, but it was into the deep end very quickly. Bernd was coming to Glyndebourne from an opening night of another opera,

so he joined us later in the afternoon. He'd sent me and lighting supervisor Jonny Venn a list of moving light focus presets, and the expectation was that they would be ready for when he arrived. Tom "Gadget" Warren was the lighting programmer on *Don Giovanni*, and we began working through Bernd's list; Gadget at the lighting desk while I called the focus from the stage. Although terrifying, it's this kind of experience that makes the scheme so brilliant. It places Lumières in positions of responsibility, while supported, but also gives you the space to make mistakes and learn. Bernd had worked at Glyndebourne before, and like every designer I've met, he commented on how lucky we were to work in this extraordinarily beautiful setting. One of the wonderful things about Glyndebourne is how international its artists are, and the piano-stage rehearsals are an exciting mix of languages. Director Mariame Clément worked in four languages (French, German, Italian and English),

depending on which member of the team she was talking to, and Bernd similarly switched seamlessly between English and German. This was the first time I'd witnessed first-hand the designer-programmer relationship, and it was a masterclass in speed and communication. Gadget's fingers were constantly flying across the desk; every time Bernd created a different position or colour, this needed to be stored as a new preset or colour palette. Glyndebourne schedules a "bauprobe" or technical day for each production of the season. The full set is built on stage several months prior to beginning rehearsals, and gives the creative team a chance to try out ideas, and check things will work as they envisioned. Julia Hansen's set design placed the opera in a hotel with three levels, and Bernd layered the staircases and corridors with beautiful and menacing shadows. In the second act, the walls were removed, leaving the exposed framework of the building for the fiery



finale. There were also additional electrics built into the set, all of them tested and developed during the bauprobe.

Alongside each opera, I also joined the lighting team for changeovers. Even though there was a fixed festival rig overhead, some units needed to change between bars, and there were always additional specials. Front of house usually included an extensive refocus as well. Even though there were only a few hours to achieve this, lighting supervisor Arnaud “Cookie” Stephenson made it look easy, calling up channels to be focused in quick succession. The lighting department uses Google Sheets for paperwork,

and all the focus information for each opera is stored on a shared drive. This ensures everyone can access it; no extra software is required for anyone to make edits, and it can all be done on a phone or iPad. The lighting team is exceptional, headed up by Vic Pyne and led by one of three supervisors for each opera, with each member of the team jumping into

whatever each production requires, from followspotting to focusing to set electrics. It’s a supportive environment, and this ensures the visiting lighting designers feel very well looked after, and ultimately are in a position to make their best work.

There was hardly any time before I was straight into the next opera, *Dialogues des Carmélites*. This work by Poulenc is set during the French Revolution, and tells the fictionalised story of the Carmelite nuns who were guillotined for refusing to renounce their vocation. The lighting designer was Alessandro Carletti, who I first met during a pre-production meeting the week before we began

work on stage. Alessandro told me that his first priority would be to establish a rough look for each scene, and then he would go back to finesse and develop a cue structure within the scenes. The most immediate challenge for lighting was the enclosed nature of the set, which included walls on both sides tapering to a central upstage point, and a ceiling. For Alessandro, the bauprobe was particularly useful in understanding how light might inhabit the space, and crucially, the angles needed to light the space effectively. Alessandro was using a projector as a light source. The projector was situated at the back of the auditorium, and sound and video supervisor Jonathan Moss had mapped it neatly onto each wall and the floor. The open white of the projector took on a haunting and stormy green colour when it hit the pale mint walls of Katrin Lea Tag’s beautiful set. “This is Carletti green,” director Barrie Kosky said, half-jokingly. For UK-based designers, perhaps that area of the colour spectrum is not the most

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used, and I asked Alessandro about this in the next break. He said it's a colour that he uses frequently in his designs, as it offers so much dramatic potential. For a form like opera that can have such a heightened visual language, this is a really useful area of the spectrum. We began to add followspots as we moved through the piano and stage rehearsals. Barrie and Alessandro found them useful for lighting characters while keeping them surrounded in darkness. Alessandro asked me to document these cues as they were added, and I stayed in touch with the operators via comms to pass on intensity level requests from the production desk. In one particular moment, leading character Blanche was highlighted while a garden of flowers was pushed on in darkness beside her in a moment of pure theatre magic. Lighting technician Abi did an amazing job at nailing this

difficult pickup; in complete darkness she needed to iris tightly into Blanche's head, and smoothly fade up over ten seconds, all while Blanche journeyed around the stage. This was not the only coup de théâtre of the production; during the second act, a mob of Revolutionaries smashed through the prompt side wall and a crush of chorus cascaded into the space. Alessandro had specified 60kw of PAR cans to blast through the rupture in the wall, and it looked spectacular. Amy Clarke and Dave Manion co-programmed this opera, alternating sessions between them. It was another masterclass in programming, and sitting a row behind in between the LD and programmer, it was astonishing to see the command line of the desk fill up with syntax before Alessandro had barely finished making a request. Once the opera had opened (as with



every opera at Glyndebourne), Amy and Dave meticulously tidied up the showfile before it was exported into Moving Light Assistant (MLA).

The first two operas flew by, and before long I was starting my penultimate opera at Glyndebourne: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Sir Peter Hall's production of Britten's opera premiered at Glyndebourne in 1981, and has been enchanting festival audiences ever since. The lighting designer was Paul Pyant, and we met a week before we went onto stage. Lighting supervisor Clare O'Donoghue, Paul and I spent a morning checking through plans and focus notes. The design

A Midsummer Night's Dream
© Glyndebourne Productions Ltd
Director: Peter Hall
Revival director/original choreographer: Lynne Hockney
Designer: John Bury
Lighting designer: Paul Pyant
Photo: Tristram Kenton

continues to evolve every time it's revived with the changing technology; overhead moving lights were replaced with LED, front of house generics were changed to Lustrs, and there were no longer any scrollers. During the bauprobe, Paul and lighting programmer Gadget worked thoroughly to incorporate any changes to the rig, and by the time we began the stage and piano rehearsals it was in a very good shape already. Although Paul has revisited his design many times, it was amazing to watch his continued pursuit of storytelling. The production is very well documented, but Paul wasn't satisfied with simply copying numbers and values from the previous revival. Where there was opportunity for the lighting to contribute further to narrative, character or setting, Paul was always looking to push the design further. One of the changes

made for this revival was the use of live moves. The production used lots of rustling and swaying trees (some played by dancers) to beautifully evoke a forest brimming with magic and intrigue. During transitions, the lighting emphasised the movement through the use of break-up gobos, cutting through haze and the movement of the foliage. Paul asked Gadget to deliberately build live moves into these transitions. This allowed moving lights to track across the stage as they moved from one position to the next, normally something a programmer would be trying to hide! This approach was so successful that we applied something similar to every transition. The production used two followspots, and even though we had an existing cue list, Paul asked me to update and amend as we made changes. Followspot

operators Adam and Connor did an excellent job staying on Puck as he jumped and sprinted from branches to logs.

There's only a few more weeks left at Glyndebourne and only one more opera before the end of part one. I will really miss the team at Glyndebourne, and I'm so grateful for their support and all the combined knowledge they have generously shared with me. 🍀

Dialogues des Carmélites
© Glyndebourne Productions Ltd
Director: Barrie Kosky
Designer: Katrin Lea Tag
Lighting Designer: Alessandro Carletti
Photo: Richard Hubert Smith

