

# THREE MASTERTHEATRES

FRANCIS REID'S theatric tourism takes him to Bibiena's Bayreuth and Cuvilliés' Munich – and to an anonymous Venetian jewel on the Dalmatian island of Hvar.

## MARKGRAFLICHES OPERNHAUS IN BAYREUTH

Photographs of Bayreuth's 'other' opera house – Bibiena's Margravine's Theater – had led me to believe to expect an ornate auditorium filled with such an extravagance of decorative detail that any performance on the stage would almost certainly be an anticlimax. So I was amazed and delighted to find that, on the contrary, the auditorium seemed to have a dignified restrained elegance with colouring really rather discreet.

I should not have been surprised. This has happened to me quite frequently and I keep hoping, even believing, that I have developed a compensating eye for the overstated images that are inherent in much colour photography. I have always assumed that the apparently heightened colour of a photograph is due mainly to the concentration of image that stems from miniaturisation, partly to conversion to two dimensions and perhaps a little to the contrast with the environment in which the photograph is viewed. A glossy print, whether colour or monochrome, also seems to distort the elegance that is a feature of the good examples of highly decorative theatre architecture. Let me add that all this is pure speculation: it is some thirty years since I dabbled in theories of perception.

The Bayreuth Opera House was commissioned by the Margravine, Princess Wilhelmine. She was the sister of Frederick the Great for whom Knobelsdorff had just completed the great Berlin opera house. The Margravine sent for the plans and Knobelsdorff is thought to have visited

Bayreuth. However, it was Giuseppe Galli Bibiena who was engaged to build the theatre. Or rather to furnish it. The stone shell is by another hand, almost certainly Joseph Saint-Pierre. Bibiena's function was to furnish this shell with a timber-framed interior of stage and auditorium. This was a period when theatre design involved both the auditorium and the stage scenery: Giuseppe Bibiena was nominally the architect while his son Carlo was the decorator. Work commenced in 1745, the theatre opened in 1748 and Carlo Bibiena remained for some ten years in Bayreuth as stage designer.

It was a report of the size of the stage that attracted Wagner to Bayreuth. The baroque theatre could not have been more unsuitable for his concept of music drama, but he saw the potential of the town for a festival and it was in this opera house that he conducted Beethoven's ninth symphony in 1872 to celebrate the laying of the foundation stone for his new theatre on the hill.

There was a major restoration in 1936. The theatre had been subject to some adaptation over the years to make it suitable for the changing fashions in mounting productions. In 1936, the auditorium was once again restored to a flat floor and the orchestra pit raised to its original level. During this restoration the original colours and a series of decorative elements were rediscovered.

The overall impression is of green and gold. The green is a delicate grey green. Most of the decorative work is flat painting with some gold work in relief. There are panels of cool blue and flashes of red. It is extraordinarily elegantly beautiful.

The theatre is used for occasional performances, particularly concerts, and the lighting errs (if that is the word!!) towards modern safety standards. But to sit there, as the casual tourist can, listening to eighteenth-century music, even when merely recorded, is magic. It takes little imagination (and for anyone who has been to Drottningholm – see CUE 9 – it takes virtually no imagination at all) to evoke the ambience of the 500 wall brackets that were delivered in 1748 by the 'Court and University Tinsmith in Erlangen' for gilding by the 'Court Cabinet Guild and Ornamental Painter'.

Alas the original stage machinery is not preserved; but we must be grateful that the continual adaptations that kept this a practical working theatre over two centuries changed only the stage and not the audi-

torium.

The foyers are simple in the extreme with unadorned flat balustrading – eighteenth-century architects understood the need to preserve the dramatic impact of the auditorium (our own National Trust have recently tested this theory by painting the foyers and staircases of its Bury St Edmunds Theatre in the same colour as the auditorium – and proved that this *does* reduce that essential moment of excitement that one must experience on stepping inside any performance room.)

## CUVILLIÉS THEATER IN MUNICH

This same contrast from cool but inviting foyers to warm dramatic auditorium can be seen in Munich as the theatre which was originally the 'Residenz Theater' but has become the 'Old Residenz Theater' or now more universally called after its architect the *Cuvilliés Theater*. However, in this case the foyers are not the originals from 1753 since the theatre was reassembled on a new site in 1958 after being dismantled in 1943 as a precaution against war damage.

The Cuvilliés Theater as it now stands is closer to its original 1753 condition than at any time in its two centuries of extensive usage as a performance space in a major theatrical city. The stage was modified from time to time to take account of the changing practices in staging and this included the installation of the first revolving stage in the western world for an 1896 performance of 'Don Giovanni'. The auditorium was altered and refurbished several times including a 1779 retreat by the orchestra pit into the space previously occupied by the forestage. There was a thorough restoration in 1801. The performances were transferred to the new adjacent National Theatre in 1819 only to return in 1823 when the new theatre was destroyed in a blaze. The old theatre suffered only heat damage but required considerable refurbishment. There was further closure in 1831, this time for 25 years when it became a scenery store. An 1856 reconstruction became the basic form for nearly ninety years subject only to various improvements to lighting, heating and stage equipment.

The lighting has gone full cycle from the original series of small chandeliers hanging from the ceiling through (1801) a single chandelier that could be drawn up and (1856) gas-lit sconces and chandelier that were converted to electricity (1883) and lasted until destruction by air raids (1944)

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