

ABDUCTION ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS



Picture Mozart's lovelorn Pasha Selim consulting Hercule Poirot about the abduction of one of his wives. Seem far-fetched? It will seem less so to anyone who attends Houston Grand Opera's new production of *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, set by director James Robinson on the famed Orient Express. The choice, however startling, was not an arbitrary one, for Robinson has found some striking parallels between this new setting and the era that spawned the work.

Mozart's ebullient singspiel was born during a veritable Turkish craze that gripped much of Europe in the late-eighteenth century. In 1683, the Ottoman siege of Vienna had rendered the Turks an emblem of barbarism for the Viennese, but by 1781, when Mozart went to work on his new opera, the European view of the East had changed. The establishment of limited trade relations between the two countries had sparked widespread fascination with the exotic culture of the Orient. According to *The Metropolitan Opera Book of Mozart Operas*, "The figure of the Turk was quite popular in Europe.... Turkish instruments were introduced into military music, people dressed as Turks at masked balls, and in Vienna there was at least one Türkencafé." In theatrical and musical circles, Turkish subjects were all the rage, and the topicality of its libretto made *Abduction* a surefire hit.

Today, the Turkish craze of Enlightenment Europe has little resonance for modern audiences, many of whom are barely aware of the obsessions of a distant past. Searching for a way to draw twenty-first-century audiences into the world of Mozart's masterpiece, Robinson lit on a more recent incarnation of the same phenomenon, one that remains fresh in the collective consciousness thanks largely to its grandest and most memorable manifestation: the Orient Express.

"The 1920s was a time after the world had become very modern in a big way — it was post-World War I. The breakup of the Ottoman Empire [was] around that time, so there was a lot of exploration into the Middle East by Westerners, and if you look at the influence that the exoti-

BY LOUISE T. GUNTHER

cism of the middle East had on art, architecture, furniture, music and all that, it's not unlike the time period in which Mozart wrote the opera."

The freshness of Robinson's vision is not confined to its novel setting; the updating suggested new ways of looking at the characters as well. "Putting it in the '20s, in a somewhat modern context, but with a little bit of distance — so that it still has that romantic separation that makes it possible to see things more clearly — gives a real opportunity to explore the relationship between Pasha Selim and Konstanze: why is she attracted to him, and why is he attracted to her? There is that East-meets-West thing going on, because I think the Pasha *wants* to become Westernized, he wants to understand the Western mentality, and I think Konstanze thinks it's exotic and romantic to be swept up into this world. And there is a lot of miscommunication. The Westerners think of the Turks as being merely exotic and maybe a little barbaric, and then the Turks look at the Westerners as being frivolous and materialistic."

Removed from their thrice-familiar surroundings, characters that are too often presented at face value, as stock figures in a formulaic "rescue" opera, take on new and different dimensions. Even Konstanze, that prototype of unshakable love, gets a new spin. "Konstanze doesn't seem to be too reluctant at having been 'rescued' by the Pasha, because I think she really believes Belmonte is dead, and what else does she have to live for? Here's this really handsome, swell guy, in the form of the pasha, and if we think of her as being from some type of noble upbringing and being accustomed to living in a certain way, perhaps she'll go with him. I don't think that she's been enslaved so much as she's been invit-

ed rather strongly to become a part of his world. Take the aria 'Märtern aller arten,' where she says, 'Bring on the tortures, I'm not going to succumb.' In this version, the tortures are not knives and daggers but temptations, things she has a weakness for — diamonds and jewelry and Chanel dresses and beautiful rugs."

Robinson is not a believer in updating for updating's sake, but he felt that in the case of *Abduction*, a new approach was warranted. "If you don't try to get under the skin of this piece and figure out what else is possibly in it, the whole story is all out there in five minutes. You

know exactly what's going to happen, so there's no conflict."

Playing on other recent cultural references can help audiences to a better understanding of the piece's social milieu, as well. "Blonde is English," the director points out, "and she goes on about her Englishness. There's something about the class structure in England, even today — particularly the servant class — that people still really pay attention to. I think it heightens it just a little bit, because we've all seen *Upstairs Downstairs* on Masterpiece Theater, and seen these people who are so loyal to the people they work for. We're very familiar with the very dedicated English maid, and it's kind of a stereotype, obviously, but that's what Blonde is — and Pedrillo as well."

This won't be *Abduction's* first ride on the Orient Express. The concept had its initial outing at Wolf Trap in 1998, and Robinson and designers

Left to right, costume designs for Osmin and Konstanze (Act II and Act III) by Anna R. Oliver.



Allen Moyer (sets) and Anna R. Oliver (costumes) are thrilled to have a chance to revisit a favorite production. "The space at Wolf Trap is a very small stage, the Barns, and it's hard to convey vastness in a small space. What we thought would be great would be to create a realistically small environment, and make it as exotic, as luxurious, as dangerous as possible, so that the stakes are elevated a bit. The whole thing takes place on a moving train, and we are going from an exotic location, Istanbul, to Paris, so there is that idea of moving from something

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unfamiliar to something familiar." Robinson notes that the concept holds up well in a larger theater as well. "These are realistically scaled train cars, and they were not big," he says. "There's something about containing the action in a really enclosed environment and being able to contain all that energy, so that you're able to uncover the complexity of the relationships."

Current events have lent a new topicality to the opera's Middle-Eastern themes, and Robinson doesn't shy away from this angle. "Abduction can seem to play on the worst possible stereotypes," he notes — "that the Turks are barbarians and the Westerners are right. But I think there is a real cultural clash here, that during this opera, during this journey, these two worlds are trying to figure each other out, dealing with some of their preconceived notions of stereotypes and prejudices. And some of those happen to be true, and some of them turn out not to be

true. The pasha demonstrates his clemency in such a beautiful way. He's really moved by Konstanze's love for Belmonte. So in many ways, he's much more forgiving, much more civilized than Belmonte's father could ever have thought to be. I don't think there's any attempt to make it a political evening of theater, because it's not. It's actually a much more personal thing. I think that what we're trying to do in this production is point up the fact that


there are so many misunderstandings between these characters, between the Turks and the Westerners, and nobody's right. That's the thing. It's all about getting to know each other and trying to understand cultural differences. And sometimes these things are thoroughly understood in the piece, and sometimes they're not — but that's kind of the way the world is, too." ©

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