



The brilliance of *Brundibár*

Director of music Paul Hoskins and conductor Lucia Švecová talk to Toby Deller about The Purcell School's special production of the children's opera with a tragic backstory

In any school, but especially a specialist music school, a project that feels to the students as though it's being led by them is much more precious than something where they feel they've got to turn up and be directed,' says Paul Hoskins, director of music at The Purcell School.

A new project currently offers students at the Hertfordshire institution just that kind of creative opportunity. Under the supervision of conductor Lucia Švecová, they are working on a production of *Brundibár*, the 1938 opera written for children by Hans Krása and Adolf Hoffmeister about a malicious organ-grinder and the young singers who unwittingly antagonise him. The production will include designs provided by the art department and direction led by the drama department. Composition students, meanwhile, have helped rework the score to fit the student ensemble.

Baton raised:
Lucia Švecová
(above)

'Coming from Slovakia,' says Švecová, a former organ scholar at Jesus College Oxford, 'I knew of this piece but, to be fair, I didn't know it too well. So it has been a journey of discovery for me as well. *Brundibár* immediately felt like the right repertoire to introduce opera to the younger students.'

Švecová had also realised that 2022 would mark the 80th anniversary of the first performance of *Brundibár*, at an orphanage for Jewish children in Prague. However, the history of the piece took the most horrific turn thereafter: Krása was arrested and sent to the Terezín ghetto in 1942, eventually using a smuggled-in score to create a new version for the instruments and performers in the prison. A first performance there in September 1943 was followed by many others. Eventually, one was filmed as propaganda by the Nazi authorities – the last, since within weeks they began murdering

its participants, including Krása, at Auschwitz and elsewhere.

According to Music and the Holocaust, one of several online resources run by the Jewish education network ORT, it was only since its US and UK premieres in 1975 and 1977 that *Brundibár* began to gain familiarity internationally. The various initiatives inspired by the work since then include the annual Brundibár Arts Festival in Newcastle and Gateshead founded in 2016 by violinist Alexandra Raikhlina to showcase music written during the Holocaust.

The historical context is as important a part of the school's project as the process of putting it on or understanding the opera's themes – pertinent as they may be for a group of young musicians. For example, the production will be set at the Prague orphanage (The Purcell School is, as it happens, also now housed in former orphanage buildings), to ensure the origins of the work are brought to prominence.

Švecová's usual position at the school is as one of six practice supervisors, a flexible role combining non-teaching support for the school's academic function and supplementing the work of specialist instrumental teachers and suchlike.

'We have a lot of instrumental teachers who have maybe a handful of students each,' explains Hoskins. 'The on-site staff have really exhausting lives during our short but very intense terms – they are up late at night, they are up early in the morning: they are managing the emotional life of teenagers who may not be terribly happy or might be a bit homesick or might be stressed or are going through whatever it is young musicians go through.'

'The practice supervisors help us give the students great experiences over the weekends and evenings, and support us in a really meaningful way. The important thing for me is that their own careers are also developed with the opportunities that they get here. Because actually there aren't many places where Lucia could work and also put on an opera in her spare mornings.'

For Švecová, that development means continuing to build on the start she made to her conducting career while she was at Oxford. She not only studied with various teachers but also found herself involved in all sorts of conducting activities, from her chapel choir to orchestral conducting. It led to her becoming music director at the Oxford Opera Society, a student, alumni and volunteer group that staged César Cui's *A Feast in Time of Plague* in 2021.

It also means highlighting the formational elements of *Brundibár* as a project. 'I've always also been very excited about the outreach aspect of music and creating more access to opera,' says Švecová, 'I've been very aware myself that if I hadn't had all these little training opportunities throughout university where I was able to try out conducting with a bit of this, to be a répétiteur for a bit of that, I would never have even considered it as a potential career path.'

Hence, she has deliberately sought to open up opportunities to those who are interested, in whatever capacity that may be. 'The whole thing has been set up on a voluntary basis, letting the students come forward and say: I'd be interested in doing this or that. One particular student has been absolutely amazing with directing rehearsals. We had another student who created the poster because they happened to have their own special link – they already knew about the opera and said: "I really want to create something for this".'

Although it will be Švecová who conducts the performance, she has encouraged students to get involved with that side of the production too. 'We had a girl come forward who wanted to conduct a bit more, so she conducted the blocking rehearsal last week. Another student wants to do a little bit of the orchestral rehearsals. I'm hoping for it to be training in all the different areas for anyone who's interested. Obviously I try to always have a session with them before so they kind of know what they are doing when they come to the rehearsal. But ultimately I let them lead, and I'm just there to make sure that everything is working.'

For his part, Hoskins is happy to see experiments like *Brundibár* continue in future years. 'Traditions are very easily formed in this place and in this country, I think,' he says. 'It's much more difficult to get rid of things than it is to start things up. I know – whether it is Lucia or a successor – now there will be somebody who says: "What's the children's opera this term?" As soon as you've done something once, and it is successful, people want it to happen every year. Anything like that is valuable because a new venture sets a precedent and people will want to emulate it.'

His own ideas for the school's future are focused for the moment on its 60th anniversary celebrations, postponed from 2022 to 2023. 'Covid has prevented us from having a big fanfare and song and dance about that, but the intention is to do a "Purcell at 60" season next year, to involve lots of masterclasses with alumni, lots of new work, lots of commissioning composers.'

Beyond that, however, his perspective is shaped to some extent by his previous, 20-plus year career as music director with Rambert Dance Company.

'My vision for the school is it shouldn't be a school, really, it should be a mini-professional arts organisation,' says Hoskins, 'It should be creative and imaginative; it should aspire to be professional in whatever we're doing whether it's our marketing or our advertising or our backdrops or our singing.'

'We should be trying to do everything to the highest possible standards, to model what the students will do in the future.' CM

The Purcell School's production of Brundibár takes place at 7.30pm on 28 March in the Constance Pilkington Hall. Tickets are free of charge and allocated on a priority basis; to register an interest, please email concerts@purcell-school.org

Aspiring professionals: students have created their own marketing materials (below)



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