Arts of the Year 2017

New opera and kimchee sandwiches, Aeschylus in Lambeth, Mahler's inner man, English pastoral

MATTHEW BOWN

The American Southwest is notable for, inter alia, its beacons of Britophilia. The transplanted London Bridge; the *Queen Mary*, now a hotel. And the Henry E. Huntington art collection in San Marino, near Pasadena. Here, on the railroad man's estate, one gets an unparallelled sense of the ambitions, the snobbishness, and the flamboyance of British art around the time the Royal Academy was founded. Huntington's collection also embodies a particular time in the history of the art market, roughly a century ago, when Duveen was ransacking Europe and Gainsborough was the most valuable artist on the planet. This market was a political harbinger. As the US prepared to don the mantle of superpower, the relics of its retiring predecessor were being amassed at great expense.

Huntington's trove of full-length society portraits populates a vast green-damask room, constructed in imitation of Hertford House, the home of the Wallace Collection. Fashionable London is out in force: there are paintings by Reynolds of the Duchess of Devonshire and Sarah Siddons. When I visited, a couple of months ago, the collection's most celebrated work, Gainsborough's "Blue Boy", had been removed for restoration (this simply provides an excuse to go back). Hung to face him, at the other end of the room, is Thomas Lawrence's "Pinkie", painted when the artist was twenty-five. The eleven-year-old Sarah Barret Moulton looks you square in the eye. The landscape rises only shin-high, her backdrop is an unquiet Constablesque sky. The ribbons to her pink satin bonnet snake in the wind; Lawrence's brushmarks are as breezy as the weather, performative, *con brio*. Moulton mysteriously conceals her right hand behind her back: an extraordinary invention evoking both children's games and inchoate sexuality. Moulton was born in Jamaica. At the age of nine she sailed to England for her education; Lawrence painted her when she was eleven; she was twelve when she died of tuberculosis. "Pinkie" was the last painting Huntington bought; he never saw it hung. It's stupendous.

Toby Jones as Lance and Mackenzie Crook as Andy in *Detectorists*

GUY DAMMANN

Opera houses are hard pressed. Contemporary music is struggling. And yet, somehow, the last few years have seen a bumper crop of new operas, many of them excellent. I can't explain the trend, but I've certainly enjoyed it. This year I've seen no fewer than seven main-stage productions of new operas. Among them were Brett Dean's *Hamlet* opening at the Glyndebourne Festival (*TLS*, June 21), a piece which proved much more gripping than it had any right to be, though I've no idea how the extravagant percussion fared when the production toured this autumn. The trick when adapting for opera is always to put the music in the driving seat, but that's not so easy with *Hamlet*. Somehow Dean managed it, and Allan Clayton carried it in his barnstorming performance in the title role. The Finnish composer Sebastian Fagerlund pulled off a similar feat in his adaptation of Ingmar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata* which opened at Helsinki Opera in September. Bergman's film has no underscore at all (the only music you hear is played by the characters) but Fagerlund's music went straight for the jugular, creating a tight field of swirling musical energy which, just like the suppressed rage that gradually seeps up to the surface in the film, at times threatened to obliterate the characters entirely (sung by Anne Sofie von Otter and Erika Sunnegårdh). Another case where strong and uncompromising musical ideas made for overwhelming stage drama was Aribert Reimann's new setting of three Maeterlinck marionette plays, *L'Invisible*, which opened in Berlin in October (*TLS*, October 25) and has remained firmly fixed in my memory ever since. I'm not whistling the tunes, though, because there aren't any, which means my bathroom still resounds to the hit numbers of *La Bohème*, and has ever since the Royal Opera's delightfully up-front new staging of Puccini's evergreen masterpiece opened its current season (*TLS*, September 27).

COLIN GRANT

At Bill Viola's Guggenheim retrospective in Bilbao, I sat in contemplative silence, enthralled by his beguiling videos. In one, an endless procession of people stream through a wood, drawn by a soundless siren; each carries an odd item, a chair, a lampshade, a picture frame. It's not immediately clear why, but gradually the truth creeps up on you: they're all unknowingly dead. It's a potent example of Viola's evocation of our hidden dread, and the under-explored spiritual dimension of our lives. Forced to surrender to the unsettling rhythm of Viola's videos, audiences emerge – like the couple in another art piece moving more slowly than seems possible through a curtain of rain – into the light.

The afterlife, too, pervades David Lowery's film *A Ghost Story*, a mordant tale softened by low-key special effects. The protagonist, a forlorn ghost, simply depicted with a white sheet over his head, scratches away at the mortar in his former home to retrieve messages from the past, hoping to leave an impression on the future. There's little comfort from the other watchful stay-at-home ghosts, longing for their loved ones' return, constrained by impotent fury as life carries on without them.

A kind of musical sacrament was witnessed at the Barbican's *Jim Jarmusch Revisited* concert, as an idiosyncratic gathering – including the exuberant chanteuse Camille O'Sullivan and the avuncular Ethiopian jazz master Mulatu Astatke – paid tribute to Jarmusch's musical taste. The artistic sensibility, evident in the choice of Astatke's slithery music from *Broken Flowers*, was demonstrably in harmony with Jarmusch's wry, reflective filmmaking.

And jazz riffs through *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?*, Kathleen Collins's posthumously published collection of short stories that fizz and crackle with joy and lust. These fresh, surprisingly modern tales which kept company with woodlice forgotten in a trunk for thirty years, reveal a stunning new voice, unheard at the time but which rings loudly now.

MARIA MARGARONIS

The strongest plays I saw this year took drama back to its roots and brought community to the stage. In Paula Vogel's *Indecent* at the Cort Theatre in New York, a troupe of Yiddish actors and musicians shook the dust of ages from their sleeves, broke into an accordion-driven song and dance routine and wove together the stories of a play by Sholem Asch, a lesbian kiss in the rain, and a people's long migration to America. At the Royal Court in London, in Jez Butterworth's *The Ferryman*, an Irish grandmother dreamed aloud as the Troubles' long shadow swallowed up her lively, contentious family. Upstairs at Bethnal Green's Rich Mix, five actors distilled the agony of India's partition in Sudha Bhuchar's beautiful *Child of the Divide*, which tells of a Hindu boy raised by a Muslim family until his heartbroken parents come to claim him back.

All these plays use repetition, ritual, poetry to draw vast histories into the intimacy of the stage – the work done in classical drama by the chorus. In the stunning version of Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* produced by the Actors' Touring Company, the chorus fills the stage, the air and the mind for hours afterwards. Refugees from forced marriage seeking asylum in Argos are played by local young women, who dance and sing and chant their fear and ecstatic rage with uncanny, wild precision. David Greig's tight translation, John Browne's driving score and Sasha Milavic Davies's sweeping choreography work together to build an electric emotional force field; the issues at the play's heart – asylum, women's rights and citizens' obligations – could hardly be more urgent. I saw it at the Young Vic; it's going on to Hong Kong, Istanbul, and possibly Epidaurus, always drawing on the local community, as ancient Greek drama did, to supply the chorus.

ADAM MARS-JONES

I saw two blockbuster films this year as a paying customer that I thought unnecessarily good. Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* extended the atmosphere and implications of the original with remarkable assurance, and the proxy love scene (I can't think of another way of putting it) was particularly touching. Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* took ultra-familiar material and made it entirely fresh with the device of three interlocking but conflicting time schemes – a week for the forces on the beach, a day for craft at sea, an hour for planes in the air. This formal decision allowed him to cut from one moment of crisis to another with the relief only of variety, and no slackening of overall tension, packing an enormous amount of emotion into a modest running time. It's a mystery that Nolan should have jeopardized such a marvellous achievement with a single naff sequence, perhaps primarily intended for use in a trailer for the film, with Elgar's "Nimrod" on the soundtrack, the camera homing in on Kenneth Branagh's not particularly expressive face as he lays down his binoculars and the monumentally clunky exchange "What can you see?" "*Hope*", the result being to warp an implacable film about men and war into a heartstirrer about British indomitability.

On television, the third series of *Detectorists* gave as much delight as the first two. This is the reverse of an ego trip, despite being written and directed by its star, Mackenzie Crook. If the programme-makers want to quote me as saying this is the best pastoral comedy since *As You Like It* I suppose I will have to let them.

The company in *The Suppliant Women* at the Young Vic

CAROL OJA

For women in the United States, 2017 signalled a new wave of agitation and accomplishment, notably through the #MeToo movement, which has unleashed an outpouring of long-suppressed complaints of sexual harassment. In the realm of new music composition, for the first time ever three works by women became finalists for the Pulitzer Prize in Music. The composers are Ashley Fure, Kate Soper and Du Yun. The prize is awarded "for distinguished musical composition by an American that has had its first performance or recording in the United States during the year". Since 1943, seven of seventy-one Music Pulitzers have gone to women. Full disclosure: I chaired this year's music jury.

The opera *Angel's Bone* emerged as the winner, with a score by Du Yun and libretto by Royce Vavrek. It was produced by the Prototype Festival in New York City, a prime example of the indie infrastructure for new music in the US. Shaped as a surreal soap opera that juxtaposes the quotidian with the horrific, *Angel's Bone* tells of a deteriorating marriage disrupted by two angels who fall from the sky, and are then forced into human trafficking. "I like a lot of different things equally, with no boundaries, and in a very serious way", Du Yun declared in an interview from 2015. Such a cosmopolitan vision of style marks a significant strain among American composers. For Du Yun, boundary-busting is achieved by blending musical signifiers in multiple domains – from East and West, from ancient realms and raucous pop. "I thought about today's most-talented chef", Du Yun declared to the online journal *NewMusicBox*. "It's not about the Chinese cuisine, the Japanese cuisine . . . .What if we do a kimchee sandwich?"

ANNA PICARD

The Latvian maestro Mariss Jansons issued a hurried apology for his remarks on women conductors in an interview with the *Daily Telegraph* last month. "Not my cup of tea", he told a reporter who, earlier this year, had got into hot water over saying that Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, Music Director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, needed "to find her inner man" when conducting Mahler. It's small beer in the Brobdingnagian brewery of the New Sexism but it made me wonder which inner man might be found in a Mahler symphony, were one to look for him: the lover, the neurotic, the invalid, the iconoclast, the convert, or the boy?

There was a lot of Mahler this year, much of it from the London Symphony Orchestra: François-Xavier Roth's exhilarating, balletic First Symphony; Gianandrea Noseda's bloody battle with the angry sprawl of the Seventh; Bernard Haitink's solemn, introspective reading of the Ninth; Semyon Bychkov's visceral Fifth. It's interesting how snooty some people still are about Mahler, as they are about Puccini, finding both composers "vulgar". I struggle with the Eighth myself. Yet there was Sakari Oramo's homely, heartfelt reading of the Second with the BBC Symphony Orchestra; Esa-Pekka Salonen's exquisitely tempered performances of the Third and the Sixth with the Philharmonia, and Gražinytė-Tyla's playful reimagining of the Fourth with the CBSO, a child's view of heaven, with three boy trebles in place of the usual adult soprano. It didn't quite work. The voices were too small and their German was fluffy. But the players were with Gražinytė-Tyla all the way.

I remain unconvinced that anyone needs to find their "inner man" on a podium or that Mahler's music might have masculine or feminine characteristics. But my inner and outer women are tickled pink that Gražinytė-Tyla, who is not the first female conductor to head a major British orchestra, moves like a girl. Specifically, she moves like a prepubescent girl who is not yet conscious of how her appearance and manner are going to be judged, mostly but not exclusively by men. Is it this joyful lack of inhibition (something I have not seen among her more cautious, businesslike sisters) and physical confidence that provoked the comment, or the fact that what she hears in Mahler – a freshness, lightness and flexibility – disrupts the conventional view of him as forever furrowed with male angst?

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Temporary architecture was a rare and radical idea when the Serpentine Gallery started their summer pavilion project seventeen years ago in Kensington Gardens. In recent years, the pavilion has succumbed to showy statements rather than, as its name suggests, being an inclusive, communal space with boundary-pushing design. Bjarke Ingels's pyramid of hollow fibreglass boxes in 2016 looked like a twisted high-rise tower; the year before, SelgasCano's structure of rainbow plastic panels felt like stumbling into a tent at a festival while in a drug haze. This year's pavilion, however, by the Burkinabe architect Diébédo Francis Kéré, was an unassuming joy. Its indigo, free-standing wooden walls, made from tessellated triangles which looked like African textiles, circled and skated beneath a slatted roof that swept towards the sky, like the canopy of a tree, supported from the centre by a woven-steel trunk. Cantilevered openings above and Tetris-like chinks in the walls below created atmospheric light and gave you a sympathetic 360-degree view of the surrounding park.

Earlier in the year, I was haunted by a small exhibition of film and photography by the Irish artist Richard Mosse at the Barbican Centre's Curve Gallery. Using a military camera that detects body heat from a distance of over 30km (it's considered a weapon under international law because it's made for battlefield awareness and long-range border surveillance), Mosse records the thousands of refugees fleeing to Europe every day from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Senegal and Somalia. In a huge, three-screen installation called *Incoming*, scenes of people stranded on beaches, holed up in makeshift camps, praying, on overcrowded boats, are made to seem more raw yet unreal by the monochrome-hued visuals, an unsettling reassessment of the familiar. Faces take on a strange spectral texture; movements are heavy, as the camera captures everything at a slowed-down pace. One image that stuck with me was of an autopsy: figures in hazard suits and masks unzip a bag containing the decomposing body of a refugee child, the skull shining bright against the dark, slicked fur lining of a coat. After cutting off a bone for DNA testing, their hands and the instruments they leave on the table are smeared with whiteness.

MURIEL ZAGHA

While growing up in the 1970s in France I had been vaguely aware of the existence of progressive rock and *musique planante*, but the V&A's immersive promenade show *Their Mortal Remains*, retracing the career of Pink Floyd, revealed the depths of a cultural phenomenon that I had largely overlooked. Initially conceived by the late Storm Thorgerson, who created many of Pink Floyd's album covers alongside Aubrey Powell as the design duo Hipgnosis, the idea for a larger-than-life, comprehensive retrospective was carried out by Powell after Thorgerson's death. It is likely that the persuasive cogency of the show came from having been constructed by an insider. The result was a resonant landscape, a space imbued with the energy of performance and adorned with hundreds of artefacts that gave brilliant, dazzling flesh to the group's journey, both in personal terms, with a narrative of the blossoming and eventual failure of collective endeavour – like so many bands, Pink Floyd had about them something of a utopian marriage – and in creative terms, making tangible through numerous examples the nature of successful inter-media cross-fertilization. The enriching alliance of architecture (the original professional direction of Roger Waters, Nick Mason and Richard Wright), visual design and music was made clearly legible, whether in unforgettable footage from a 1972 concert movie shot in the empty amphitheatre at Pompeii, in the recounting of the dramatic making of the cover of the album *Animals* (launching and photographing an inflatable pig flying over Battersea Power Station in a world innocent of Photoshop), or in the exploration of the groundbreaking staging of *The Wall*. But for all the impressive technological innovation on display, what I took away from the exhibition was the strong vein of English pastoral running through the history of Pink Floyd, along with a pervasive air of Francophilia: the band also wrote film scores for the director Barbet Schroeder and collaborated with the choreographer and dancer Roland Petit.