

PHOTOGRAPH MARTIN ARGLES FOR THE GUARDIAN



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## A seat near the deer, please

This pop-up opera house in the heart of the English countryside is one of the most thrilling venues in Britain. **Jonathan Glancey** goes wild at Garsington's new pavilion

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Robin Snell takes a look around the rolling fields and hills of Wormsley Park, a luscious green space in the Chilterns that's home to hares, kites, sheep, deer and partridges. "The site we found was perfect in pretty much every way," he says. "It has a beautiful outlook. It's quiet. And we've been able to fit the pavilion into the landscape very conveniently."

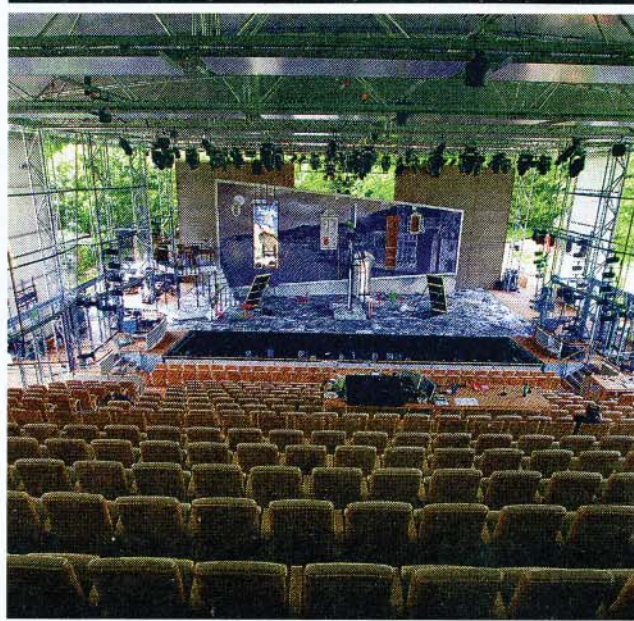
Snell, an architect and clarinetist, has reason to be proud. The pavilion in question is an astonishing creation: a 600-seat opera house in the heart of the countryside. What's more, after its five-week season, this daunting collection of steel poles, timber planks and PVC screens will be packed away. This is pop-up opera, and when *The Magic Flute* opens here on Thursday it should confirm this delightful marriage of architecture and landscape as one of the most thrilling places in the country to hear live music.

Wormsley Park is the new home of Garsington Opera, founded in 1989 by Leonard Ingrams, a banker and violinist. He bought Garsington, a 17th-century Oxfordshire manor house, in 1982.

Within seven years, inspired by Glyndebourne, he had created his own country-house opera in the walled gardens of his estate. "But," says Anthony Whitworth-Jones, Garsington's director, "when he died in 2005, it was clear the show would have to go elsewhere. The family, although hugely supportive, wanted their home back."

Whitworth-Jones and his team visited more than 40 sites before settling on Wormsley. They could have gone further afield, he says, "which might have made our search easier, but that would have meant breaking away from our backers, who are our audiences. Garsington was a local event. At heart it still is - and always will be."

Wormsley Park, a 2,500-acre estate boasting an 18th-century country house, is the former pile of philanthropist Paul Getty, who died there in 2003. It is now home to Mark Getty and his family,



'It has a beautiful, quiet outlook'... (clockwise from main) the view over Wormsley Park; access to the pavilion; the whole structure at dusk; the deer, whose ha-ha serves as the orchestra pit; and the 600-seat auditorium



who have granted Garsington a 15-year lease, on condition that the site - next to the estate's farm and Getty's famous cricket ground - is returned to grazing land for the deer after each season.

As a result, the pavilion doesn't just settle into its surroundings, it actually exploits them - in particular the ha-ha, as the hidden ditch designed to keep the deer in is called. "The ha-ha now doubles as the orchestra pit," explains Snell, who was project architect for Glyndebourne's superb 1994 opera house. "So we've not had to excavate. The concrete foundations are like pads set into the grass with the building bolted on top. Once it's taken down, the pads are grassed over and you'd never know there had been a building of any sort here, let alone an opera house."

**Want decor? Then look around**

Snell based his design on traditional Japanese kabuki theatres. These colourful timber pavilions, which flowered in the 17th and 18th centuries, made elegant use of sliding screens and were often connected by bridges to gardens outside. Stage, bridge and garden would be used for performance, making indoors and outdoors meld into one. This spirit lives on in Snell's sparsely yet elegantly functional steel frame. Apart from its gently rippling roof, it does little to draw attention to itself; all the colour stems from either the gardens, costumes or sets.

"It's simply a question of what was appropriate," says Snell. "We needed to find a way of building, and

deconstructing, that would be quick and easy. This is a big kit of parts that serves as a frame to performances. The landscape, along with what's on stage, is all the decoration you could want. Things might be different if this was to be a permanent building, though."

No one will expect a temporary pavilion to be as proper a setting for full-blooded opera as, say, the Royal Opera House. Yet the Garsington pavilion really is fully functioning, complete not just with high-ceilinged auditorium, stage and pit, but also with boxes, champagne bar, verandas and stairs to parade up and down in fine summer frocks and dusted-down DJs - all the while looking out at that meandering view. That's not something you spend a lot of time doing in a big city venue.

In fact, thanks to its clear screen sides, you can see out into the forests and fields from any one of the linen-covered, timber-framed seats. And, as performances start at 6pm, the auditorium will still be filled with light as the orchestra strikes up. "A part of the magic," says Snell, "is that the audience arrives in bright sunshine and leaves in the dark, when the pavilion lights up, changing character almost completely. It's meant to be a theatrical experience in every way."

**Let's pray it doesn't hail**

But what happens when it rains? "We thought a lot about this," says acoustician Robert Essert. "What we've come up with is a fine mesh screen, a bit like a mosquito net, stretched above the roof. This breaks raindrops down into tiny globules, so that when they hit the roof below, they will have turned into mist. Unless we get hail, you won't hear rain inside the auditorium."

Essert has also shaped what he calls "windsurfer sails" along the sides of the pavilion. These bounce sound from the pit and the stage back into and along the auditorium, so that it isn't lost to the skies. The roof is designed to do likewise. The pavilion promises some fine sights backstage, too: to swap wigs, change costumes, or just take a breather, performers will have to nip off to nearby farm buildings, bustling along paths and through flowerbeds.

Oboist Helena Gaunt can remember some stormy nights at the previous Garsington venue. "You couldn't hear yourself play because of the wind and the rain. But equally, you'd have those extraordinary evenings when the birds were singing in the first half, and dusk was falling on a warm, still night. There's something very special about that. And audiences seem to love the spirit of it come what may."

The Magic Flute opens on Thursday and is in rep until 5 July. Box office: 01865 361636; garsingtonopera.org

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