



Opera in Paris

Bellini, Rameau, Handel & Wagner

5–10 February 2025 (ML 623)

6 days • £3,960

(including tickets to 4 operas)

Lecturer: Dr Michael Downes

Rameau's *Castor et Pollux* returns to the Paris Opéra, 288 years after its first performance.

Nineteenth-century masterpieces by Bellini and Wagner at the Opéra Bastille.

Pretty Yende, Alice Coote and Brindley Sherratt lead a starry cast in Handel's *Semele* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

Guided visits offer behind-the-scenes insights into Paris's two magnificent opera houses.

Visits to the Musée Jacquemart-André and the Musée de la Musique.

Opera and Paris are intricately intertwined: opera has always been a vital part of the city's cultural and social life, and Paris in turn has shaped opera to an extent few other places can match. Paris's opera houses are central to the histories both of the city and of the art-form, and most important composers, whatever their countries of origin, came to Paris at some point in their careers to try and establish their reputation in the world's capital of opera.

The Sicilian-born Vincenzo Bellini followed in the footsteps of his friend and mentor, Rossini, gravitating towards Paris at the height of his career. Set in the English Civil War and reportedly Queen Victoria's favourite opera, *I Puritani* was commissioned by Paris's Théâtre-Italien in 1834 and turned out to be Bellini's final work before his untimely death the following year. We see Laurent Pelly's highly praised production in the monumental Opéra Bastille, one of the Mitterrand era's grandest *projets*, built to mark the bicentenary of the French Revolution. Lisette Oropesa plays the Puritan heroine, Elvira, a welcome return to Paris after her unforgettable 2024 performances in Pelly's production of *Giulio Cesare*; Elvira's Royalist lover, Lord Arturo Talbot, is played by fast-rising American tenor Lawrence Brownlee.

Below the proscenium arch of Paris's Palais Garnier hangs a drape bearing the inscription 'Anno 1669' and an image of the sun. This is a permanent reminder to the city's opera-goers that the Académie d'Opéra – later renamed the Académie Royale de Musique, but generally known simply as 'the Opéra' – was founded by the 'Sun King', Louis XIV, inaugurating an



The Palais Garnier, by Henry Rushbury from 'Paris' by Sidney Dark.

unbroken performance tradition unmatched anywhere in the world. Sixty-eight years after the Opéra's foundation, Jean-Philippe Rameau's lyric tragedy *Castor et Pollux* was premiered at the Académie Royale; now it returns to that theatre's magnificent successor on the Avenue de l'Opéra for a rare revival, in a new production by Peter Sellars. Greek-born Teodor Currentzis, whose revelatory Mozart performances have won praise all round the world, conducts; French mezzo-soprano Stéphanie d'Oustrac, a favourite at Glyndebourne, takes the role of Phébé.

Richard Wagner's relationship with Paris was fraught, to say the least, but he lived in the city for an extended period in his late twenties and returned there on several occasions later in his career for several frustrating attempts to triumph at the Opéra. Despite his lack of success, he made a permanent impact not just on France's music but also its literature: Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry and Proust were just a few of the writers to fall under his spell. We return to the Bastille for the first part of Wagner's mighty Ring cycle, *Das Rheingold*, in a new production by iconoclastic Spanish director, Calixto Bieito. Leading French baritone Ludovic Tézier takes the part of Wotan; New Zealand Heldentenor Simon

O'Neill plays his slippery sidekick, Loge.

If the disastrous Paris premiere of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in 1861 was the most notorious musical fiasco of the nineteenth century, then its twentieth-century equivalent was the near-riotous reception accorded to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* on its first performance in 1913. That extraordinary evening unfolded at the beautiful art-deco Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, which we visit on the final day of our tour for an early-evening performance of Congreve and Handel's subversive masterpiece, *Semele*. The production is conducted by French period-performance specialist Emmanuelle Haïm and directed by Oliver Mears, Director of Opera at Covent Garden; a starry cast is led by Pretty Yende in the title role, Alice Coote as Juno and Brindley Sherratt in the double role of Cadmus and Somnus.

Itinerary

Day 1. Travel by Eurostar at c. 10.30am from London St Pancras to Paris. Time to settle in to the hotel before dinner.

Day 2. Morning visit to the sumptuous Palais Garnier opera house. Free afternoon before a lecture, dinner and evening performance at the Opéra Bastille: *I Puritani* (Bellini), *Corrado*

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Rovaris (conductor), Laurent Pelly (director), Lisette Oropesa (Elvira), Lawrence Brownlee (Lord Arturo Talbot), Andrii Kymach (Sir Riccardo Forth), Roberto Taliavini (Sir Giorgio), Vartan Gabrielian (Lord Gualtiero Valton), Nicholas Jones (Sir Bruno Robertson), Maria Wenberg (Enrichetta di Francia).

Day 3. Morning tour of the Opéra Bastille. An afternoon lecture and dinner precedes the evening performance at the Palais Garnier: **Castor et Pollux** (Rameau), Utopia Choir and Orchestra, Teodor Currentzis (conductor), Peter Sellars (director), Jeanine de Bique (Télétaire), Stéphanis d'Oustrac (Phébé), Reinoud Van Mechelen (Castor), Marc Mauillon (Pollux), Claire Antoine (Minerve), Laurence Kilsby (L'Amour, Le Grand-Prêtre, l'Athlète).

Day 4. Morning lecture, then drive to Porte de la Villette to visit the Cité de la Musique and the music museum. Evening at the Opéra Bastille: **Das Rheingold** (Wagner), Pablo Heras-Casado (conductor), Calixto Bieito (director), Ludovic Tézier (Wotan), Florent Mbia (Donner), Matthew Cairns (Froh), Simon O'Neill (Loge), Kwangchul Youn (Fasolt), Mika Kares (Fafner), Brian Mulligan (Alberich), Gerhard Siegel (Mime).

Day 5. Morning lecture then visit the Musée Jacquemart-André, due to re-open in September 2024 following renovation work. The lavish residence was built in 1875 for the banker Edouard André and houses the collection he made with his wife, Nélie Jacquemart, a painter. It contains a fine collection of 18th-century paintings: Dutch, Flemish and Italian masters. Early evening opera at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées: **Semele** (Handel), *Le Concert d'Astrée orchestra and choir*, Emmanuelle Haïm (conductor), Oliver Mears (director), Pretty Yende (Semele), Ben Bliss (Jupiter), Alice Coote (Junon), Brindley Sherratt (Cadmus/Somnus), Niamh O'Sullivan (Ino), Carlo Vistoli (Athamas), Marianna Hovanisyan (Iris).

Day 6. The morning is free before the Eurostar to St Pancras, arriving at c. 4.30pm.

Lecturer

Dr Michael Downes. Director of Music at the University of St Andrews, musical director of St Andrews Chorus, Scotland's largest choral society, and founding artistic director of Byre Opera. He has lectured for most of the UK's leading opera companies and writes programme notes for Wigmore Hall and Aldeburgh Music. Publications include books written with and about contemporary British composer Jonathan Harvey, and a collaboration with Nike Wagner, great-granddaughter of Richard. *Story of the Century*, his new book introducing Wagner's *Ring*, will be published by Faber and Faber in November 2024; his next project will be a biography of Elgar for Oxford University Press.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,960 or £3,710 without Eurostar. **Single occupancy:** £4,600 or £4,350 without Eurostar.

Included: return rail travel (Standard Premier) by Eurostar from London to Paris; private coach for transfers; hotel accommodation; breakfasts and 5 dinners with water, wine, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Music: tickets for 4 performances (all top category except for *I Puritani* in category 1) are included costing c. £630.

Accommodation. **Hotel Édouard 7** (hoteledouard7-paris.com): comfortable 4-star hotel, located on the Avenue de l'Opéra, a short walk from the Palais Garnier. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? Visits require a fair amount of walking and standing around. There are some late nights. You need to be able to lift your luggage on and off the train.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.

Combine this tour with: *Mozart in Salzburg*, 28 January–3 February 2025 or *Renaissance Rivals*, 11–18 February 2025.