



# THE VIRTUES OF THINGS

A CO-COMMISSION AND CO-PRODUCTION BETWEEN  
ALDEBURGH MUSIC, OPERA NORTH AND THE ROYAL OPERA

SUPPORTED BY A LEGACY FROM  
**MS D. KURZMAN VIA ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND**



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A CO-COMMISSION AND CO-PRODUCTION BETWEEN  
ALDEBURGH MUSIC, OPERA NORTH AND THE ROYAL OPERA

MUSIC **MATT ROGERS**

LIBRETTO **SALLY O'REILLY**

CONDUCTOR **RICHARD BAKER**

DIRECTOR **BIJAN SHEIBANI**

DESIGNS **GILES CADLE**

LIGHTING DESIGN **MATT HASKINS**

**AURORA ORCHESTRA**

LINBURY STUDIO THEATRE

2 | 5 | 6 MAY 2015

BRITTEN STUDIO, SNAPE MALTINGS

9 MAY 2015

HOWARD ASSEMBLY ROOM, LEEDS

15 MAY 2015

# WELCOME

Benjamin Britten's English Opera Group redefined the opera landscape, with its chamber-scale opera productions that offered the full emotional impact of the operatic form. Britten's legacy was that middle-scale opera of the highest quality can and should be commissioned and produced by the same set of artists and institutions that make large-scale work.

Britten's centenary in 2013 provided a unique opportunity to launch a renewed initiative in this area, so Aldeburgh Music, Opera North and The Royal Opera have joined together to commission and share productions on an annual basis. *The Virtues of Things* is the second of three sets of commissions over three years. We were very proud of our first collaboration in 2014, which presented *The Commission* and *Café Kafka*, and was funded through Arts Council England's Britten centenary fund. This year's project and the next are funded through a legacy from Ms D. Kurzman, received by Arts Council England.

Aldeburgh Music, Opera North and The Royal Opera have strong track records in identifying composers, nurturing them and producing contemporary opera, and each has a strong audience for new work.

Over the last decade there has been a welcome growth in grass-roots opera composer and writer development at all the UK opera companies, but these workshop programmes are often not linked to performance opportunities or geared towards composers who may go on to write large-scale works. Work on the middle scale is now a major part of the programming of many European opera houses – and most opera commissioning takes place on this scale. This is no longer seen as just a scale for 'artist training' – instead, the work is an opportunity to engage audiences in the most innovative and highest quality composition.

We are excited that you are following us on this next step of our journey, nurturing new operatic talent and ensuring that Britten's legacy will thrive for generations to come.

**Kasper Holten**  
The Royal Opera

**Roger Wright**  
Aldeburgh Music

**Richard Mantle**  
Opera North

# CAST

SELBY DE SELBY **DAVID STOUT**

ELLIPSIS DE SELBY **FIONA KIMM**

PEG DE SELBY **ROBYN ALLEGRA PARTON**

EAMES **PAUL CURIEVICI**

DOCTOR GRAVID **RICHARD MOSLEY-EVANS**

APPROXIMATE TIMING

80 minutes; there is no interval

# THE STORY

For generations the De Selby family have been in the business of making props for operas. The best opera houses enlist their venerable craftsmanship for all the finest productions. We join them the day after Parabola, one of the senior designers, has fallen ill. The family are about to embark on a new commission that is bigger and potentially more difficult than any previously undertaken, and so Great Aunt Doric, the absent matriarch, has sent a freelancer. This newcomer, Eames, is received with mixed feelings by Ellipsis, the other senior designer, her cousin Selby the master craftsman and his niece Peg, the apprentice.

Eames is of the modern school, using technology as a means of design and manufacture, which the craft-oriented De Selbys consider meagre, soulless or simply ugly. Tensions arise when Eames suggests that their approach is outmoded, and Ellipsis's ire leads to her eventual breakdown. Doctor Gravid is called in. He announces that the mysterious illness that has struck down Parabola has also claimed Ellipsis. It is psychological in nature: the sufferer experiences adverse reactions to objects of significance and may well start to mistake any fictions associated with them for reality.

Nevertheless the family must press on with the job in hand. With Ellipsis overseeing the project from her daybed, Eames leads Selby and Peg through his idea for the new prop – a lighting effect. Selby's interest is piqued by this new approach, but he cannot let go of traditional craft and the beauty he believes to be inherent in materiality. As he argues for the use of paraffin lamps over electronics, he starts to develop symptoms, but his descent into illness is halted by the delivery of a prop (a section of castle battlements) from an opera that has recently finished. Peg unpacks the prop and, for Eames's entertainment, enacts a scene from the opera it featured in. Ellipsis is by now very ill, and becomes delirious as she enters the fiction of Peg's performance.

The doctor is summoned and announces that initial tests suggest the illness is hereditary. He sends Eames to the forest to gather the ingredients for a folk remedy, which should keep symptoms at bay until further assessments can be made and the appropriate treatment identified.

On his return, Eames, sceptical of the doctor's eccentric methods and diagnosis, administers what little of the remedy he could gather and urges Selby and Peg to test the prop he has designed. At this point, his ambition and curiosity are eclipsing his concern for anything else. The lighting effect is turned on, and the opera for which it is being made absorbs the family into its narrative.

# CONDUCTOR'S NOTE

## RICHARD BAKER

Matt Rogers and Sally O'Reilly have created a work that articulates many of the most pressing aesthetic concerns of artists and composers today. In a piece that deals with fundamental questions of how art objects are made, every aspect – the structure, the way the characters express themselves, the slightly incontinent way the music lurches between its different styles – epitomizes what being a composer is like in the early 21st century. The opera plays with many operatic archetypes and conventions, both darkly comic and filled with real pathos.

At the start the operatic mode feels like a familiar one, but as the narrative unfolds and the illness that afflicts the family takes hold, things begin to unravel. The musical material becomes more extreme, but so does the way it is put together: the neatness of Act I gradually dissolves into something much messier toward the end of Act II,

and Act III is wilder still. One gets the impression that the mysterious illness has intruded into the score itself. Similarly, what might at first seem quite a classical instrumentation – string quintet and wind quintet – is used in increasingly unconventional ways. Throughout the opera, the conventionality of the instrumentation, the respectful treatment of text and voices, and the inclusion of familiar rhetorical devices are all subtly undermined by the way the music proceeds from moment to moment. The result is a score quite unlike anything else.

The music of *The Virtues of Things* is very varied. Matt is strongly influenced by computer games music, but also references a variety of operatic styles, and there is one moment of near-perfect Sondheim pastiche. His natural gift for melody and sure-footed pacing are on display here. While there are recurring melodic and thematic ideas, it's certainly not 'through-composed' in the conventional sense: it's a riotous celebration of heterogeneity.



Conductor Richard Baker.

*All rehearsal images ©ROH. Photographed by Stephen Cummiskey, 2015*





Above, Richard Mosley-Evans and Robyn Allegra Parton; below clockwise from left, Fiona Kimm, David Stout, Richard Mosley-Evans, Robyn Allegra Parton and Bijan Sheibani.





# COMPOSER'S NOTE

## MATT ROGERS



Above, Paul Curievici with Fiona Kimm and David Stout

Opera is sometimes characterized as ridiculous. For me, though, it's not that opera itself is ridiculous, but rather that it can employ ridiculousness to portray indescribable aspects of the human experience. As irrational creatures, it is not only apt but necessary that we have in our reflective toolkit more illogical diagnostic modes. It is this capacity of opera, this virtue, that excites me and draws me to the form.

My music has no default genre, and in *The Virtues of Things* nothing better represents the spirit of fuzzy logic than the role of genre. *Virtues* is broadly a classical piece, within which other divergent influences exert themselves, intervening or lying dormant, depending on the dramaturgical job in hand. The music of Symphony X, Ozma, Hair Stylistics, Olivia Newton-John and Troyka, for example, has all had significant bearing on what I've written. For the most part these influences remain discrete, serving far more veiled and sophisticated functions than overt reference. Conversely, you may well find in the piece clear influences that I would never have noticed myself, along with those from music I have never even heard. Add to this the impact of the other fictional operas embedded in the narrative, their music permeating our own opera, and we find ourselves nicely all at sea.

Structurally, the music of *Virtues* follows dramatic arcs – from wellness to illness, and from order to disorder. One way in which I planned to express this was through a shifting attitude towards harmony across the three acts. I thought of Act I as being more ‘vertically’ driven, meaning that it is led by harmony (which on the page can be read from top to bottom). Act II I thought of as more ‘horizontal’, led by individual lines with the harmony emerging as a by-product. And Act III I conceived as more about the density of pitches than either harmony or line. Of course none of these attitudes was ever the hard and fast rule, and it is now only true to say that this was where I began.

I chose the instrumental forces with two main properties in mind, aside from the timbral qualities of the instruments themselves: firstly, there is no percussion, and secondly there are no fully polyphonic instruments. Percussion and polyphonic instruments are great for ease of expressing rhythmic and harmonic material respectively, but there is a danger of over-reliance upon them for exactly those reasons. I knew that the lack of these possibilities would leave me with a compositional challenge, the solving of which would bring an inevitable energy and specific character to the piece as a whole. As this approach would suggest, I see composition partly as the invention of problems that will elicit complex solutions, and as the De Selby family would tell you, these solutions come in a whole variety of flavours of chords, textures and solar systems.



Director Bijan Sheibani in rehearsal with Fiona Kimm, Paul Curievici and David Stout

# THE VIRTUES OF THINGS

## SALLY O'REILLY

Any given day is a montage of activities and moods, continually altered in its course by people, objects, places and events. People, too, are impelled by diverse biological and societal forces, as well as being conscious, wilful creatures with many, often conflicting, desires. Consequently, no place where they congregate has a single function or atmosphere. In *The Virtues of Things*, the De Selbys' workshop is the site of production not only for opera props, but also for personal relations and business hierarchies, which in turn cause subtle frictions and, with the arrival of the freelancer Eames, a clash between traditional craftsmanship and modern technologies.

Ellipsis, one of the firm's principal designers, tells Eames how they design a prop: by imagining it in its totality and then stripping out the unnecessary details to find the essence of that particular tree, teacup or battlement. We could pretend that the world of the opera was similarly imagined in its complex entirety and then whittled down to the story to be told. But in fact, like Eames, we are modern artificers. We assembled and interconnected forms, ideas, intentions and references that were central to our aims, and then allowed many of the details to generate themselves. By introducing a narrative of ambition to the trajectory of an illness, we precipitated a situation with tensions that we could never have tooled by hand. By contriving a confrontation between technological progress and occult power, the unreliable nature of knowledge demonstrated itself; and by conferring destructive power onto objects, the chaos intrinsic to the material world was simply amplified. We were keen to point out, however, that not all conflict is destructive. So while craft and technology sit uneasily together within the De Selby workshop, Doctor Gravid is perfectly at ease with anachronisms and contradictions. He subscribes to the value of contemporary neuroscience as well as that of ancient folk remedies, as though he trained at a high-budget research centre in a top university while reading plenty of Agrippa's esoterica on the side. But this seems fair enough, since frontier technologies can look like magic to the uninitiated; and what is folklore but an outmoded technology, after all?

The illness that beleaguers the family is based on the real psychosomatic disorder Stendhal Syndrome, whereby great works of art provoke palpitations, giddiness or fainting. But where beauty is the trigger for the real-life condition, in our opera it is significance. The symptoms surface in response to props, for besides being archetypes, they are also objects of immense importance in the narratives of the operas they belong to. But although these props clearly infect the family with the music and the drama attached to or inherent within them, Eames cannot apprehend the situation.



Above, David Stout and Fiona Kimm

Perhaps he is sceptical of Gravid's unorthodox methods or holds illiberal attitudes towards mental health, or maybe he cannot sense an object's back story or see beyond its generic symbolism.

The props encountered belong to a curious range of operas. The bell jar and the atoms are from *The Father of Chemistry*, a biographical opera about the 17th-century scientist Robert Boyle; the castle crenulations feature in *The Tilted Lady*, a historical fiction that follows the travails of a woman who escapes from a besieged castle after having sacrificed one of her buttocks to feed the fighting men. The final prop in our opera – the solar system – is from the opening scene of a fictional opera also called *The Virtues of Things*, which reimagines the role of the pre-Enlightenment artist. The first and last of these 'embedded' operas mark the transformation of humanity's understanding of its position in the universe: the bell jar heralds rational science's establishment of the individual as distinct from the rest of nature, which he observes; the final prop leads us back to a time when humanity was merely one part of a vast, interconnected whole conceived by an omnipotent god.

As a reflection on this medieval worldview, in our opera all objects are potent, and anything can potentially become an object, whether it is made up of text, music, action or materials. Within the dialogue, language is employed as an *aide memoire*, a persuasive display of authority and even mortal weaponry. As they submit to illness, the De Selbys increasingly suffer from the impact of words, music and light. Causation becomes scrambled;

they begin to perceive meaning everywhere. As an audience, and in life, we are prone to read causal relations as linear and relatively simple: this thought leads to that action, this effect is the fault of that deed. We might say that in our opera the music becomes more abstract from one act to the next, or that the language develops airs, beginning with a bawdy pub song and growing increasingly poetic. We could note how scale flips from the atomic to the galactic, from a dispute between people to the ire of gods; or we could follow the callousness of Eames, which escalates as he approaches his goal. But while these are valid routes through the opera, all these factors affect one another in complex ways that cannot be disentangled. People behave according to subtexts we do not have access to; powers manifest that contravene common sense; and musical motifs arrive with but are not tied to any one character, object or mood, because they too have hidden agendas and are subject to unknown influences.

*The Virtues of Things* has a high metabolic rate. It eats up notes and words. Its structure writhes, growing inwards and outwards: it is referential and self-reflexive; meta-registers direct us to the apparatus of the venue, while fictions within fictions draw us to places that will never exist. The protagonists debate their creative processes, unaware they are the product of somebody else's. Specific meanings arrive fully formed in objects that appear to be hollow archetypes. The music swells and fractures – at times a natural force, like weather, in the narrative world of the workshop; at others a preternatural visitor from another opera or an elusive memory from our own world. No person is entirely knowable, no object neutral, no event predictable. But as days go, this one is only as complex and surprising as any other.