

Rupert Christiansen



Rupert recommends

The Unthanks
The bally and engaging Northumberland folk band, led by wonderful women singers, play at the Snape Mallings Proms (01728 687110) tonight

Opera's future starts here

Six years ago, I was invited to visit a new summer opera school in Castiglione della Pescaia, an adorable little seaside town on a part of the Tuscan coast mercifully underappreciated by British tourists. The late great conductor Georg Solti had a much-loved summer beach house near here, and the school, to be known as the Accademia Solti, was established in his memory with the support of his widow, Valerie.

Led by Jonathan Papp, a distinguished teacher at the Royal Academy of Music, together with a human dynamo of an executive director called Candice Wood, the Accademia's focus has always been on developing *bel canto*, the essential technique of "beautiful singing" that lies at the heart of Italian opera.

This isn't something that can be learnt through musical exercises alone. It also comes through imbibing a deeper sense of national style, and the Accademia's value also lies in the broader exposure it gives its students to Italian traditions, customs and rhythms.

Fundamental to its philosophy is the civilised idea that experiencing the food and drink, the architecture and landscape, the *passaggiata* and the *spagnola*, will enrich your singing of Bellini and Verdi. In other words, this is a holiday of the most educational kind, its value evident in the riotous free annual concert in Castiglione's piazza, which brings the three-week course to a climax and remains the talk of the town for months afterwards.

Visiting again six years on, I found that the Accademia has come a long way. It is now known as the Solti Te Kanawa Accademia, having developed an association with the celebrated soprano who often worked with Solti, and the high repute it has earned in the opera world is reflected in a dazzling list of distinguished sponsors, including the Bolshoi Institute and the restaurateur Alain Ducasse.

What charms them all to donate is the energy, talent and potential of an élite of a dozen conservatoire graduates, annually selected for scholarships from over 150 auditions worldwide. This year they included a thrilling 21-year-old baritone, Yuri Samoilov, who had spent three days travelling to Castiglione by bus from the Ukraine, while two tenors had flown in from China, and three sopranos hailed from Australia and South Africa.

What draws them is the chance to benefit from some of the best tuition on the operatic planet. Each student works in daily one-



to-one detail with Jonathan Papp or Italian coaches Paolo Spica and Corradina Caporello. They also participate in open master classes that have been given over the years by some of the legendary names in the business, Mirella Freni and José Carreras among them. The 2010 line-up included Te Kanawa and Joan Sutherland's conductor-husband Richard Bonynge (Dance-Joan had been expected, too, but, sadly, she's too frail to travel).

I had the privilege of sitting in on Bonynge's sessions and couldn't have enjoyed them more. The analysis they involved sharpened my ears, and Bonynge's brisk horse sense, born of long professional experience, was a tonic. "Don't tell me about your colds or your allergies," he told one fussing young woman. "Just learn how to sing over them, like Joan did. And she cancelled only four performances in 40 years."

"Never try to fight the orchestra by turning up the volume," he told a shyout tenor, "because the orchestra will always win." Don't lean on the end of a phrase ("it's not musical"), don't fuss too much about consonants when you're singing coloratura, and don't be too literal in interpreting a score - Italian opera composes such as Donizetti expected singers to use their imagination and personal taste. Golden rules all.

One of our edgiest and most exciting galleries extends its appeal

The border between Peckham and Camberwell hardly ranks among the most salubrious or culture-rich zones of the capital, but it does contain one shining gem: The South London Gallery, now dedicated to the exhibition of living artists, dates back to the late 19th century and embodies a fruitful collaboration between generous-spirited Victorian philanthropists and the self-helping, self-improving working class, underpinned over the past 60 years by the Keynesian philosophy of state support for the arts.

Behind its rather ungainly facade lies one of the most magnificent exhibition spaces I know: a grandly proportioned room at the end of an unpromising corridor with a magically perfect balance of light and wall-space that can do full justice to the largest canvases (Anselm Kiefer never looked better than he did here), as well as more intimately scaled work.

Under the direction of Margot Heller for the past decade, the SLG has been excitingly eclectic and edgy in its programme of exhibitions, engaging energetically with the young people in its surrounding community and developing a considerable reputation on the international scene. Gilbert & George have shown here, as have Christian Boltanski and Keith Tyson.

Some years back, Southwark Council gave the SLG the derelict house next door. Money was raised to restore the property and make it part of the gallery's



A delight: the café in the South London Gallery's new space

operations - a project completed last month.

Designed by the quietly inventive architects Six, the result is a delight, maintaining the feeling of traditional domesticity while creating a whole set of new functions.

On the ground floor, a small café opens on to a lovely walled suntrap of a garden. Upstairs are three small galleries made out of the old bedrooms, while the top floor has become a self-contained flat that can be inhabited as living- and studio-space by an artist-in-residence. Rough and

smooth surfaces, brick and timber, light and shade, old and new coexist here happily.

The South London Gallery isn't a grandly imposing temple of art, but a place of simple tranquil beauty, open to all. It doesn't charge for admission, and depends for half its modest running costs on the Arts Council.

Need I say more about one's fears for its future? In a troubled and deprived part of town, it shines as a beacon not just of high culture but also of civilised social life.

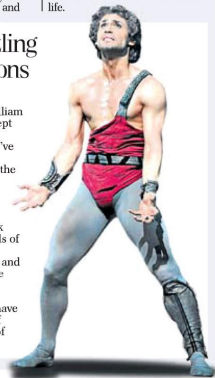
Money-making at the museum

The sacred cow of free entry to national museums could be heading for slaughter as the DCMs reviews all its options. The economics of charging are not clear-cut. One difficulty is that an admission fee puts a percentage of people off and leads to a decrease in spending in the shop and café. There are also terms of bequest to be considered - donors often insist on free access to their gifts. My feeling is that proposals for cultural Oyster cards or ticketing with free days, exemptions and concessions are too complex and expensive to administer. The easiest solution could be to rattle the begging bowl more loudly at entrances: how about waist-high turnstiles that light up red, urgently requesting an unspecified contribution?

Ballet's dazzling new sensations

"Exuberance is beauty," wrote William Blake - a phrase that kept coming back to me at Covent Garden, where I've been watching with open-mouthed wonder the sensational dancing of the Bolshoi's new stars Ivan Vasiliev (pictured) and Natalia Osipova - names that already rank with the greatest legends of Russian ballet.

Some beauty sits still and quiet, but theirs is made of dazzling energy and electric power. As Blake might also have put it, they are spirits of youth, and harbingers of joy.



Entertainment