

BEST OF
British

OPERA *Festivals*

Music, nature and picnics in the sun: here are the best country house operas to catch this summer

BY EVA MACKEVIC

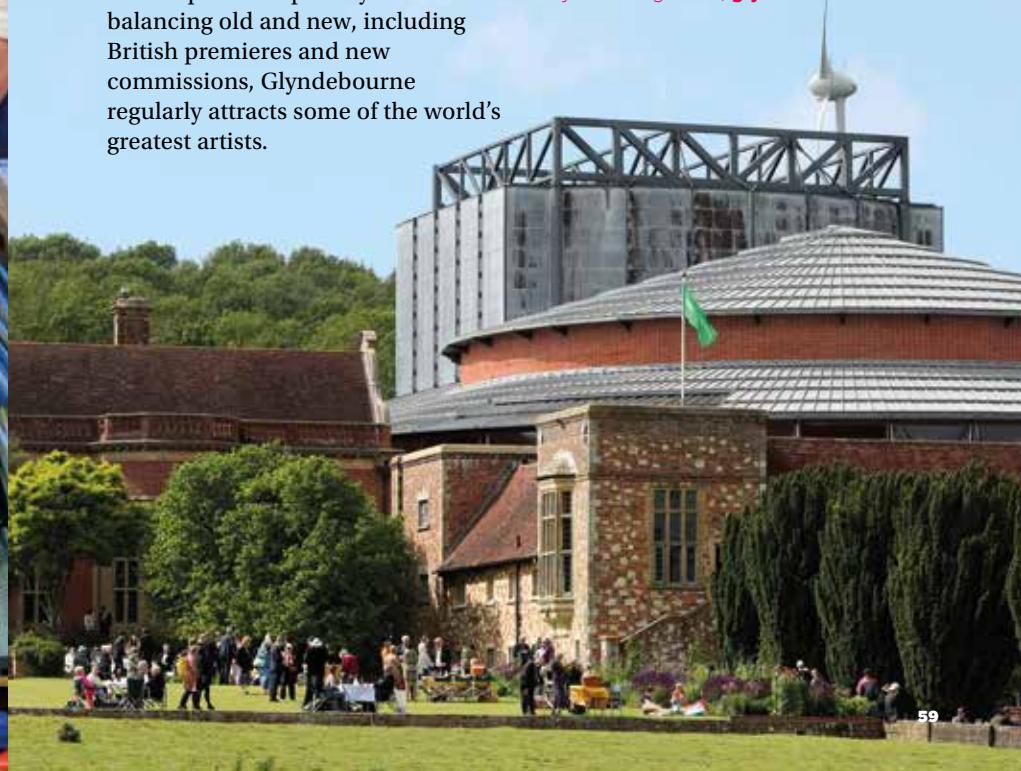


Glyndebourne Festival Opera, East Sussex

One of the oldest and most iconic opera festivals in the world, Glyndebourne started off as the eccentric landowner John Christie's passion project in the 1930s. Christie, whose wife was the renowned soprano Audrey Mildmay, had the ambition to bring world-class opera to England, and so, what began as a small purpose-built theatre which held roughly 300 people, is now one of the world's finest opera houses accommodating 1,200 people with an exceptional repertory to match: balancing old and new, including British premieres and new commissions, Glyndebourne regularly attracts some of the world's greatest artists.

But there's so much more than just music to make it an unforgettable experience. The festival's the perfect occasion to put on your flashiest outfit (black tie and evening dress are a must!), enjoy a long, lazy picnic during the 90-minute interval, stroll through the stunning country house grounds with sheep grazing peacefully in the meadow nearby, or sit back on one of the benches with a basket of strawberries and indulge in one of the best people-watching opportunities you'll ever get. Summer festivals don't get better than this.

May 18 to August 25, glyndebourne.com



Longborough Festival Opera, Gloucestershire

Nestled on a hillside and with splendid views over the tranquil Gloucestershire countryside, Longborough Festival Opera is an intimate 500-seat theatre, enabling audiences to experience the drama and emotion of the stage on an almost personal level.

Hailed as the “mini Bayreuth of the Cotswolds”, the theatre has long been known for showcasing upcoming Wagner singers, and achieved the impossible in 2013 by presenting a full-length production of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle with minimal budgets.

Founders Martin and Lizzie Graham started promoting opera to a

few hundred people in the grounds of their home back in 1991. Today, the festival takes place in a purpose-built opera house, and remains a family affair with Martin and Lizzie’s daughter, opera director Polly Graham, acting as artistic director.

This year, Longborough launches its new *Ring* cycle with a brand new production of Wagner’s *Das Rheingold*, as well as Polly’s personal favourite, Cavalli’s striking *La Calisto*, of which she says: “It’s a dark story of dominance, deception and sexual desire as well as an exploration of gender. We have a fantastic cast of singers and a firebrand female creative team. It will be thought-provoking and gripping.”

June 5 to August 3, lfo.org.uk



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Garsington Opera, Buckinghamshire

A spectacular theatre sitting within the rolling landscape of the Chiltern Hills, Garsington is an affair to remember, thanks to the incredible hospitability and attention to detail that goes into planning every step of the experience. Whether it’s a warm welcome from scouts who help guests carry their picnics, a ride on a vintage bus down to an idyllic, 18th-century walled garden or a state-of-the-art dinner menu crafted by a Michelin-star chef, you’re bound to feel like you’re taking part in something very special.

The festival also prides itself on championing less-known Baroque

works such as Haydn’s *Orlando Paladino* or Vivaldi’s *L’Olimpiade*, while this year will see the UK premiere of Offenbach’s bright and enchanting *Fantasio*.

Says executive director Nicola Creed, “*Fantasio* promises to be great fun. It will be very colourful with lovely costumes, many of which have been hand-painted. You will come out with a skip in your step having had a truly memorable evening—just the distraction that we all need at the moment! Arrive early so you have time for afternoon tea overlooking the famous cricket pitch.” With the festival celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, it’s the perfect time to pay a visit, too.

May 29 to July 26, tgarsingtonopera.org



Nevill Holt, Leicestershire

“Subtle” and “cosy” are not exactly the words you’d think of when describing a 17th century stable block—yet this peculiar setting for Nevill Holt Opera in the East Midlands exudes just that. Owned by the Carphone Warehouse magnate David Ross, the theatre was designed by Stirling Prize-winning architects with a special focus on acoustic design crafted to support young, developing voices, in accord with Nevill Holt’s mission to nurture young talent. It’s intimate and approachable but simultaneously retains a certain rustic roughness thanks to its timber and brick elements, resulting in a charming mix of old and new.

Says general manager Rosenna East, “We’re the only summer opera festival in the Midlands, so we’re very proud to be able to bring the country house opera experience to new audiences. Our theatre provides a sense of intimacy and connection between audience and performers.”

June 12 to July 2,

nevillholtoper.co.uk



Opera Holland Park, London

For an eclectic mixture of urban and country house opera experiences, you can’t go wrong with Opera Holland Park. Just a short stroll from Kensington High Street, this temporary canopied theatre is erected each summer right in the heart of one of the most serene parks of London.

With the ruins of Sir Walter Cope’s 1605 mansion, Holland House, as the majestic backdrop, and a magical tarpaulin that lends the acoustics here an extra layer of richness and grandeur, Opera Holland Park offers an unmistakable, thrilling ambiance that you’ll want to come back to every year.

The seasons typically balance fresh and insightful productions of established masterpieces, with rarities by Catalani, Cilea and Mascagni thrown in for good measure, making it the perfect destination for music aficionados striving to find the hidden nooks of opera. Book early as tickets sell out fast, and remember to bring a wrap or blanket to keep yourself cosy on chillier summer evenings!

June 4 to August 3,

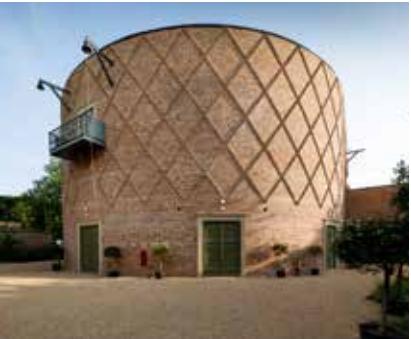
operahollandpark.com



Grange Park Opera, Surrey

Perhaps one of the most unique buildings in the English country house opera repertoire, West Horsley's "Theatre in the Woods" was built to resemble the horseshoe shape of Milan's famous La Scala. Glimpsed from among the trees, it appears as a cross-gartered, industrial-inspired brick drum, holding a five-tiered auditorium that's endowed with vibrant and resonant acoustics.

Amongst Grange Park Opera's many fans is Joanna Lumley, who describes it as a "demi-Eden," saying, "West Horsley Place is a glorious and sprawling ancient house, grand but welcoming, formal gardens with secret corners for picnickers and gazebos, a sense of history and



occasion. What happens at Grange Park is a gift to opera lovers."

Though it's relatively new, the opera house attracts some of the world's top talent and this year's edition is no different, featuring performances by one of the world's most glamorous mezzo-sopranos, Joyce DiDonato, and the charismatic baritone Simon Keenlyside.

June 6 to July 13, grangeparkopera.co.uk



The Grange Festival, Hampshire

For those seeking an awe-inspiring atmosphere, The Grange Festival in Hampshire is the place to be. The grand architectural gem that's modelled after an ancient Greek temple, 7th Lord Ashburton's mansion will transport you to a land of dreams and fairy tales. Surrounded by lush greenery and overseeing a picturesque lake, it's bound to be one of the most spectacular visual feasts you'll ever witness.

To savour every bit of this exquisite experience, arrive a bit early to take in the countryside views with a glass

of champagne until the chimes of bells beckon you into the majestic mansion for the start of the performance. This year, the programme features a vibrant selection including opera favourites by Verdi and Mozart as well as Handel's electrifying *Belshazzar*.

During the lengthy interval, you'll emerge into the glorious golden-hour light to enjoy a romantic dinner laid up at your pavilion or marquee—an essential part of the festival's beguiling charisma.

June 6 to July 6, thegrangefestival.co.uk

Is country house opera on your radar this summer? Email readersletters@readersdigest.co.uk and let us know