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There was no other work, so it allowed me to be a full-time composer for the first time in my life," says Andrew Synnott about composing the music for *What Happened to Lucrece* during the lockdown. Penned at breakneck speed, Synnott's experimental take on Shakespeare's narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* – which has multiple endings – is the most intriguing work in this year's Wexford Festival Opera, which begins next Sunday. An online event, the 69th incarnation might be a tad too virtual for some dyed-in-the-wool opera fans, but most will surely applaud a programme prepared in adversity and peppered with zippy works that tap into 21st-century pop culture as well as drawing on operatic tradition.

Rosetta Cucchi, Wexford's new artistic director, describes *What Happened to Lucrece*, for which she co-wrote the libretto, as a "YouTube opera". It was not part of the Italian's original 2020 programme, most of which was discarded after Covid emerged. "I was locked up in my studio with my computer in Pesaro, where I had to remake the festival," she says. "It was an emergency situation, but this made us more creative, because you are suddenly faced with the impossibility of doing anything and you work harder." She dedicated the remainted event to Shakespeare as he is "the most operatic poem-maker", but agrees it's "a festival for the modern virtual age".

As the deadline neared, Cucchi communicated with Ireland by email and Zoom. Synnott, who composed a version of James Joyce's *Dubliners* for the 2017 festival, began writing *Lucrece* in May. He finished on August 3. "I sent it to her bit by bit – normally you'd send it when completed," he says. "And trying to rewrite my first ending two more times was like thinking you've climbed to the top of a mountain, before discovering the real summit is still way above you."

Set in modern-day London, Synnott's work centres on a young Belfast woman called Lucrece (played by mezzo-soprano Sarah Richmond) who's trying to make her way in life. The other main character in the opera, which Synnott



Finding their voices
Richmond and Musgrave, left, rehearse their parts, written by Sinnott, below

will also partake in pop-up events in Wexford town. "I'm going to sing from a balcony. It's the sort of thing that could attract younger people to opera," says Phoenix.

Very different is *Petite Messe Solennelle*, Rossini's transfixing 1863 mass, which opens the festival. A delicious leftover from Cucchi's original programme, it will be performed by four soloists, two pianists, a harmonium player and a chorus on Wexford's main stage next Sunday (KTE lyric fm and rte.ie/culture, 8pm). The technically demanding work has "an irreverent reverence, but it's a pity we'll be looking at empty seats when singing," says bass John Molloy, one of the performers. The heavy-weight line-up includes Finghin Collins, Claudia Boyle and Tara Erraught.

Molloy's recent career, like Synnott's, has been undermined by the pandemic. "When Covid began, Wexford suddenly became one of only two jobs I had pencilled in for the rest of my life," he says. The Birr-based singer begins rehearsing for the mass with his fellow performers this Thursday, and Synnott confirms that rehearsal times have been reduced this year. "It creates problems, as none of the cast have heard the music before, for example," he says.

Still, it's a minor miracle the annual festival is going ahead at all, even if it feels a little unreal. "It's either this or nothing," says Synnott of the online version. "Rosetta had to fight hard for it and she made it happen." Like everyone else involved, he yearns for a return to packed theatres in a packed town. "There's not the same buzz around Wexford, even though the festival is a godsend," he says.

Phoenix uses a football analogy to describe the 69th festival: "It's like watching games at Anfield now. It's good, but not the same as being there with big crowds." A return to packed venues for the 70th would be a result. ■

Wexford Festival Opera, October 11-18; wexfordopera.com; performances will be on rte.ie/culture, RTE Player and RTE lyric fm

OUT OF THE SILENCE

The organisers of the 69th Wexford Festival Opera took to email and Zoom to save an event that was put in serious doubt by the lockdown, writes **Mel Clarke**

compares to a television drama, is the arrogant Sextus (baritone Rory Musgrave), whose eyes are set firmly on Lucrece. Each of the three performances have different denouements – one is farcical, another psychological and the tragic conclusion revolves around a rape. "The build up and immediate aftermath are depicted, and rape was difficult to write about," says Synnott. "There has to be tension and violence in the music." The performances will be streamed on rte.ie/culture, and viewers are invited to vote for their preferred ending.

Also indebted to literature is *Falstaff Chronicles*, an updated take on Verdi's final opera (1893) replete with modern domestic gizmos, which will be performed by members of the Wexford Factory academy. Formed by Cucchi, the factory consists of 14 student singers and is central to Wexford's young artists' programme. Its shows this month will be "a ground zero of something that

will grow", says Cucchi. *Falstaff Chronicles'* creative team has fashioned a TV mini-series version of Verdi's masterpiece. "Rather than show one staged performance, which is impossible now, it's split into 15-minute scenes which will be shown over consecutive nights," says Jade Phoenix, a soprano, factory member and Liverpool fan. "Its format is like soaps such as *EastEnders* and *Desperate Housewives*. Factory students

“It was an emergency situation, but this made us more creative”

