

# Highgate conductor will find more than just laughs in Donizetti's Don Pasquale

You could be forgiven for thinking the UK's country-house opera circuit would collapse without conductors who live in and around Highgate, with Gianluca Marciano at Grange Park, Douglas Boyd at Garsington and Steuart Bedford also at Garsington – to name just three who've featured on this page.

But here's another name to add: the young conductor Thomas Blunt, who has musical charge of Donizetti's "Don Pasquale" at Longborough, the opera house in a Gloucestershire garden that was once a chicken shed until its owner installed chandeliers and started staging Wagner.

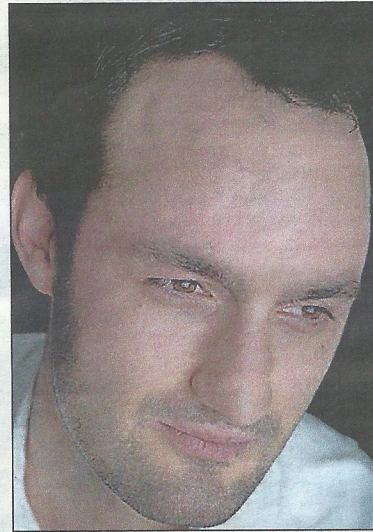
Unexpectedly successful small-scale "Ring" cycles have put Longborough on the map as a sort of English Bayreuth, with more charm. But it does lighter repertory too, and the comic froth of "Pasquale" is an example – although Blunt talks about it in

deadly serious terms as a transition piece between Rossini and Verdi.

"Of course it's funny", he says, "but there's more to it. I made my professional debut with a Donizetti score and I feel close to his genre of music. There's a lot going on there beside laughs".

Blunt's debut was with a "L'Elisir d'amore" for Glyndebourne, where he was working as chorus master in the festival and got the chance to step up as conductor on the UK tour: the kind of break all young conductors pray for.

Now he has a job as 1st Kappellmeister at the opera house in Berne, Switzerland where he's spent the past months working on a bizarrely long-running "Magic Flute". But conducting opera wasn't what he planned when he was young. A choirboy at Worcester Cathedral and organ scholar at Trinity, Cambridge, he



■ Thomas Blunt

was originally destined for a career in church music. Then he went

to the RCM as a singer, changed to conducting, and started with symphonic repertoire rather than operatic. The route to Donizetti was circuitous.

But at least it got him away from the apparently ingrained family calling of high-level espionage. His grandfather was in military intelligence. And another relative was the infamous Anthony Blunt, Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures and Soviet spy.

Thomas admits to an obsessive interest in his forebear, to a point where his nickname at school was Bluntsky. Whether he ever dabbles in the family business is a question probably best not to ask. But when someone get round to writing "Blunt: the Opera" – if they haven't already – there can only be one man to conduct it.

■ "Don Pasquale" runs at Longborough until 19 July. Details: [lfo.org.uk](http://lfo.org.uk)

**Crouch End Festival Chorus** sing Rachmaninov's Vespers – Fri 10th, Southwark Cathedral, 8pm. Alternatively known as his All Night Vigil, this choral masterpiece doesn't actually require a pillow and blankets, but you might want it to last until dawn because it features some of the composer's most soulful music. It also calls for a large, massed-voice choir to sing unaccompanied, with the precision of a chamber group: a big ask but as one of London's leading choruses they'll doubtless cope.

**Finchley Choral Society** sing Jonathan Dove & more – Sat 11th, St Mary's Primrose Hill, 7.45pm. Dove's easy-on-the-ear melodic writing makes him a popular figure in the contemporary choral world, and he features here with a substantial work called "Passing of the Year". Also on the programme music by the newly-knighted James MacMillan. Booking: 020 7263 3358.