



# Jonathan Dove

## L'Augellino Belverde - The Little Green Swallow

My favourite stories for operas take place right now, or long ago and far away. Both are times when all things seem possible, and that makes all kinds of music possible too. In 1994 I wrote two operas, one of each kind. *Siren Song* was based on a true story I had read about in the newspaper. It was performed at the Almeida Theatre, in London. A week later, in Tuscany, *L'Augellino Belverde (The Little Green Swallow)* opened. It is adapted from a theatrical fable by Carlo Gozzi (1720-1826), set in a magical world of make-believe.

At the time I was unaware how many composers Gozzi had already unwittingly supplied with ideas for operas: Wagner (*Die Feen*), Busoni (*Turandot*), Puccini (*Turandot* again), Prokofiev (*The Love for Three Oranges*) and Henze (*King Stag*). But I noticed that *The Little Green Swallow* was the sequel to *The Love for Three Oranges*: sequels are rather less common in opera than in cinema (although *The Marriage of Figaro* is a particularly famous exception) and the idea appealed to me. More importantly, this world of singing apples, talking statues and dangerous quests seemed to cry out for music, and would also make an ideal spectacle for outdoor performances in the garden and olive-grove surrounding a dilapidated seventeenth-century monastery in Tuscany.

Convento di Santa Croce, in Batignano, is the home of Adam Pollock's legendary opera festival, Musica Nel Chostro. For thirty years this was the favourite summer destination of countless British singers, instrumentalists, conductors and directors. I spent several idyllic weeks there in 1985, as rehearsal-pianist for Salieri's *La Grotta di Trofonio*. It was an intoxicating experience: playing the piano under a fig-tree at 8 in the morning (by 11 it was too hot to rehearse in the olive-grove, so we all went to the beach until late afternoon) – eating together at long tables, sharing a monastic cell with other musicians and the occasional baby scorpion. No-one was paid, everyone had to wash up – and at the end of it all, there were magical performances under the stars. I was hooked.

Even after I had given up playing the piano for opera-rehearsals, I couldn't keep away from Batignano, and returned several times as audience – usually accompanying my great friend and mentor, Stephen Oliver. Stephen had written *Beauty and the Beast* to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Musica Nel Chostro. He died in 1992, and Adam asked if I would write an opera for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. (...continues...)

Peters Edition Limited  
Hinrichsen House  
10-12 Baches Street London N1 6DN  
Tel: 020 7553 4030 Fax: 020 7490 4921  
e-mail: [newmusic@editionpeters.com](mailto:newmusic@editionpeters.com)  
internet: [www.editionpeters.com](http://www.editionpeters.com)





*The Little Green Swallow* celebrates this anniversary, and is dedicated to Stephen's memory. It was the first of five works for Batignano. I had already written two community operas for Glyndebourne, and one or two small-scale operas, but this was my first full-length work entirely for professional (albeit unpaid) singers and instrumentalists. I wanted to write about magic, and I was also mysteriously fascinated by the idea of twins. The opera was to be in Italian, of course, but I was too inexperienced to collaborate with a living Italian playwright. So I asked Adam to find an existing play in Italian that involved magic and twins. He came up with Gozzi's *L'Augellino Belverde*.

Written in 1765, it takes up the colourful characters from his earlier fable, *The Love for Three Oranges*, weaving *commedia dell'arte* into a tale of intrigue and magic, journeys and dangerous quests, satirical philosophy, encounters with singing statues, and a little green bird who is really a king under a spell. At the centre of it is a pair of twins, who begin as cold intellectuals, doubting the possibility of altruism. By the end of the opera they have risked their lives for love.

I was particularly attracted by the playfulness of the storytelling, and the childish behaviour of some of the adult characters. It suggested a playful and childlike music that at times might feel like a nursery-rhyme, or a toy.

Not being able to write Italian, I adapted the libretto by cutting and shaping Gozzi's words, without inventing any new ones. I compressed Gozzi's five acts into three, shed some minor characters and rearranged the order of some events. The *commedia*-style scenes – mainly those for Truffaldino and Smeraldina – are written, not as dialogue, but as recipes for comic extemporization. These I rendered into direct speech, letting the music be, so to speak, the extemporization.

Seeing my opera become a physical reality was a great thrill – although it was not all plain sailing. We needed three boy trebles to sing the Apples: after much searching, one local boy and his sister were brought to the monastery to learn their part – only to leave again, having been unable to remember a note of it. Eventually the Apples were sung by Donna Anna (from that year's other opera, *Don Giovanni*), her daughter, and the wardrobe-mistress. The sitzprobe was almost abandoned when the hot sun threatened to crack the cello – John Daszak (Brighella) saved the day by rigging a makeshift shade. At the dress rehearsal, high winds tried to blow away all the music as well as some of the percussion instruments. (The only set of orchestral parts had vanished for a while at Pisa airport.) And on opening night there was an unexpectedly quiet passage, when, in a moment of composurely abstraction, I forgot to give Barbarina her cue, and Margaret Preece was left dancing in distress on top of a model of the Empire State Building. (Richard Jones' production was memorably spectacular, including a promenade around a large orange replica of the island of Manhattan.)

Someone who saw that first production was tonight's conductor, Dominic Wheeler. I owe special thanks to him, and to Adam Pollock (who not only commissioned the opera but also translated it into English) for once more giving *The Little Green Swallow* wings.

As Ninetta was rescued from her eighteen-year burial, so everyone involved in this Guildhall production has helped to release the swallow from eleven years in a cupboard, to take to the air once more.