

# BRIDGETOWER



**'Came a boy from across the sea. Violin master, stunning prodigy'**

While rehearsing for the premiere of *Bridgetower*, composer Julian Joseph and I visited the street in Peckham, South East London, where George Polgreen Bridgetower died, alone and in poverty in 1860.

Bridgetower's story, from his celebrated years at the royal palace, to his lonely death, is an extraordinary part of the multicultural history of London; born to a Barbadian father and a Polish mother, by the age of 10 he was an established, violin virtuoso. He studied with Haydn, then the court composer to the Esterhazy family which employed his father. Fleeing Paris after the French Revolution, the young Bridgetower came with his father to England and the Prince Regent (later George IV) took him under his wing and had him educated at court. He was admired by the musical establishment Europe wide; Beethoven wrote the Kreutzer sonata for him (but later rededicated it to Kreutzer after the two fell out) and Bridgetower played it with him from Beethoven's barely finished score. He was described by Samuel Wesley as 'justly to be ranked with the very first masters of the violin'.

This year, the 200th anniversary of the Abolition Act forbidding the transportation of slaves on

British ships, is an ideal time to tell the stories of those, like Bridgetower, who contributed to the racial and cultural diversity of London in 1807. Mike Phillip's libretto brings Bridgetower's story together with that of Mary Prince, a Bermudian slave who, after being brought by her master to London, took refuge with the Moravian Church in Hatton Gardens and then with Thomas Pringle, an abolitionist. She published an account of her life as a slave, the first book in Britain by a black woman, and an important text for the abolitionist movement; it countered those who denied the mistreatment of slaves and refuted those who tried to argue that slaves were content with their lot. While celebrating the progress that was made in Parliament in 1807, Mike Phillip's libretto is keen to remind us that there was still a long struggle ahead (and that there continues to be around the world).

Mike Phillips suggested the life story of Bridgetower after Julian expressed his interest in collaborating on an opera after reading Phillips' *London Crossings: A Biography of Black Britain*. Joseph was keen to tell the story of how a brilliant young, black violinist found his place within the European music scene and as an established jazz pianist and compose. Joseph felt it was time to use his medium dramatically:

**'I express myself as a jazz musician because I find that it's the freest and most enabling artform to do what I envisage. I see jazz as the great absorber but I just thought one of the big things missing from jazz is dramatic works. You've got Wynton's (Marsalis) *Blood On The Fields*, Gershwin's *Porgy And Bess*, Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*. And then it starts to sort of wane. There are oratorios, poetry things... Stan Tracey and Michael Garrick... jazz with voices but the body of dramatic work utilising jazz techniques is slim'**

Joseph was also keen to use jazz to tell a historical narrative: **'I also wanted to use jazz outside of its own time. So often you hear it on film in scenes set in basements with people wearing berets, or in strip joints. I didn't want to adhere to cliché'**

Within the piece's strong jazz colour, the score acknowledges and dialogues with the composers of Bridgetower's period (including, quite literally, a little cameo for Beethoven, hurriedly composing the Kreuzer sonata, tucked into the second act). Its influences are wide both in style and period, but its jazz structures give it its coherence.

Most unusually, for a dramatic operatic work, the piece uses extensive improvisation, and the ensemble have created a nightly dialogue between not only the orchestra and singers but everyone involved in delivering the opera. A structure has been created which allows the theatrical piece to run smoothly each night but allows space for spontaneity and creativity during each performance for singers and musicians.

One of the greatest pleasures of rehearsing the piece was the fusion of disciplines, the meeting of jazz and opera singers, the sharing of skills and techniques and the breadth of experience of the forty seven people on stage. Our two young Bridgetowers, being precociously brilliant in our midst as they dashed into rehearsal between basketball practice and homework, reminded us of the terrifying talent that the young Bridgetower must have been. When we were flagging at the ends of long days, our community chorus arrived, fresh from their 'day jobs' with boundless energy.

Everywhere this production is seen, a different twenty five people will make up the chorus; for many this will be the first time they have put on a costume (and wig!) and gone on stage. They all

have different lives, jobs, families and stories, but all give up their time to sing with amateur choirs around the UK and have given up their time to appear in this opera. I hope it has been an experience they will be proud of.

They give this opera a very important quality: celebration of music and drama itself. Humans have always come together with others from their community to make music and tell stories to understand, explore, explain and celebrate their world; each time the community choruses perform they remind us of this fundamental impulse and its importance for our increasingly fragmented communities.

When we visited the Peckham site of Bridgetower's death I was surprised to find no blue plaque on the building or any visible commemoration of his life (in fact, it took us quite some time to be sure we were standing outside the right building as we loitered on various Peckham street corners). I like to think that perhaps the creation of this opera is an even better, and definitely more unique, commemoration of an extraordinary musician.

**Helen Eastman**  
Director

**'We've left it so long. We've left it too long and I've thought I want to tell stories about culturally what makes a person like me exist. I want to reflect who I am with music and stories. We have to delve into our history; we must start telling our own stories'**  
Julian Joseph

Commissioned by the City of London for the City of London Festival 2007 and presented by ETO  
Music by Julian Joseph Libretto by Mike Phillips  
Directed by Helen Eastman



Photography Keith Pattison

## SYNOPSIS

# BRIDGETOWER

### Prologue

The chorus tells us of the 'violin prodigy' who has arrived across the seas.

**Windsor Castle** The Prince of Wales, and his consort Mrs Fitzherbert, are entertaining. They present for their guests the young violinist, Bridgetower, who arrives with his father. The Prince of Wales decides he will keep the boy at court and offers Bridgetower Senior money for the boy. He threatens that if Bridgetower Senior does not accept the deal he will be enslaved. The father is forced to leave his son.

**Below Stairs at Windsor** The servants and staff of the house tease the boy. Mrs Fitzherbert arrives and puts a stop to it. She tells the boy she will look after him like a mother. She promises that one day his father will return.

**The road out of London** We see Bridgetower's distraught father.

**Windsor Castle (some time later)** We see the man Bridgetower has become.

**Lady Holland's Residence** Bridgetower attends a party at Lady Holland's House. Abolitionist William Wilberforce arrives and brings Mary Prince to give testimony to the assembled guests of her experiences as a slave. She has escaped from her former slave master. Mary starts to tell her story but causes a scene when she shows her scarred legs and is bundled out. Left alone, Bridgetower sings about this extraordinary woman. As he leaves, he meets Black Billy Waters on the street, who tells him he will find Mary at Blackbirds Hall - Billy Richmond's pub.

**Blackbirds Hall** Bridgetower arrives to woo Mary, but she accuses him of living a life of luxury while

the rest of his people are slaves. She leaves. He sets off to pursue her.

**By the Thames** Bridgetower finds Mary and they share stories of their parents.

### Interval

**Vienna** Bridgetower meets Beethoven, who presents him with a sonata written for him.

**Vienna/Blackbirds Hall** While Bridgetower plays a concert with Beethoven, Mary is dragged from the pub by men sent by her former slave master.

**Parliament 1807** The abolition of the trading of slaves by British ships is announced.

**Carlton House** Bridgetower visits the Prince of Wales and Mrs Fitzherbert. He begs for the Prince to save Mary from her fate at the hands of her former master but the Prince won't intervene. Mrs Fitzherbert decides to tell Bridgetower the whereabouts of his father, who is now lying in Newgate jail after descending to a life of crime.

**Newgate jail** Bridgetower visits his father.

**Apart** Bridgetower tries to practise but can only think of Mary. He and Mary are apart but sing of their new found love for each other.

**Blackbirds Hall** Bridgetower returns to Blackbirds Hall to find memories of Mary. There people are celebrating the 1807 Act but Bridgetower asks them if they are fools: it hasn't changed the fate of many and people are still enslaved. Mrs Fitzherbert comes to the pub, desperate to be reconciled with him but he says she must let him start a new life; no longer the rich life of the court, but a life of brotherhood with his people.