



ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

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Kevin John Edusei

on
diversity in classical music

Crystal Pite

and
her expansion of *Flight Pattern*

Alcina

with
Handel's memorable arias



In detail

Below left:
Zoi Tsokanou

Leading the orchestra for Crystal Pite's new ballet means filling the music with emotion, says conductor Zoi Tsokanou

'I've never found it difficult to get people to take me seriously as a conductor,' says the mercurial Zoi Tsokanou, speaking from Thessaloniki, where she is at the helm of the city's highly successful symphony orchestra. 'It would have been different 20 years ago, so I'm grateful to an older generation of brave and talented female pioneers, who opened up the profession for younger women like me. We can make our own way now.'

So she feels poised to make her debut at Covent Garden this

autumn with a major challenge, leading the orchestra through Henryk Górecki's 50-minute epic of lamentation, *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* – the score chosen by choreographer Crystal Pite for her new work for The Royal Ballet.

For Pite, this represents a return to music she has already used. In 2017, her hauntingly beautiful *Flight Pattern* focused on the symphony's first movement: now she will incorporate its two subsequent movements into a new whole.

'I can't wait to start the creative process side-by-side with her,' Tsokanou says. 'I'm in awe of the way she can organise the movement of a huge mass of dancers, then suddenly intensely home in on individuals.'

'I've heard some of Górecki's choral pieces, but I've never conducted anything of his before. The *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* seems to me a vast structure that has to be filled with emotion without being exaggerated: it doesn't need anything extra stirred in, it speaks straight to the heart. I felt I understood so much about its mood and meaning after visiting Silesia, where Górecki lived, and seeing the melancholy landscape with its wide grey horizons and rolling plains.'

Tsokanou's career as a ballet conductor started in Athens with *The Nutcracker* – 'OK, it's the most wonderful music, but you have to be so precise and exact. It's not easy to control' – before graduating to dance theatre works choreographed to Ravel's *Mother Goose* and Shostakovich's *Chamber Symphony*.

'I suppose you could say that conductors are like dancers – we have to express ourselves with our bodies. But the difference is that we get to decide our own choreography!'

Written by Rupert Christiansen

