

OPERA

In A Midsummer Night's Dream, Matthew Rose is top of the Bottoms

The bass with extra ass explains why he loves playing a donkey

Anna Picard

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Matthew Rose: "I've fleshed it out, my Bottom"

LENA KERN



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There is something of the policeman about Matthew Rose. It's not just his height, which at "six foot five or six" makes him taller than the average bobby in No 1 dress uniform. Caught in the act of ordering "a cheeky fry-up" midway through the first tranche of rehearsals for Netia Jones's Aldeburgh Festival production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the British bass answers questions as though giving evidence under oath. Such solemnity is at odds with the subject, which is his Bottom. "Funny every time," he rumbles. "Seriously. Shakespeare. Genius."

Rose must have heard all the jokes since making his role debut in Peter Hall's production of Britten's opera at Glyndebourne in 2006, but he gamely adds one of his own: "I've fleshed it out, my Bottom." This morning he is weary after 18 months of back-to-back projects, but he is pleased as pie to be returning to Aldeburgh. He was in his second year of studies at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia when he first visited the foundation set up by Britten and his partner, Peter Pears. "Just being there for ten days and thinking about music in a very different way was incredible," says Rose.

Five years of weekly singing lessons with Marlena Malas in Manhattan, in a studio facing the Metropolitan Opera, cemented a technique sound enough to sing operatic roles from Monteverdi to Wagner, while the Aldeburgh masterclasses piqued Rose's interest in recital repertoire.



Rose as Bottom, with Kathleen Kim as Tytania

ALASTAIR MUIR/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

With a rich, dark-timbred, evenly produced bass voice and a naturally still stage presence, Rose notched up more than 100 performances at the Royal Opera House almost before anyone noticed, first in the Young Artist programme, then as a principal. He carefully extended his repertoire from Mozart, Britten, Puccini and Stravinsky, adding Rossini, Donizetti and Verdi roles, singing his first Banquo in Blackheath, south London, where he has been tireless in his work with children's choirs and Blackheath Halls Community Opera. He recorded Schubert's *Winterreise* and *Schwanengesang* to considerable acclaim. Yet still it seemed that America and mainland Europe were paying more attention to him than the UK.

The first belated turning point was at Glyndebourne in 2015, when Rose brought a weight of tenderness and grief to the role of Collatinus in Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia*, transforming an underwritten

character into a man undone by sorrow. The second was back at Covent Garden, in December 2016, when his Baron Ochs in *Der Rosenkavalier* was so seductively funny that it was surprising that Sophie Bevan's Sophie von Faninal, supposedly repelled by her boorish fiancé, didn't shrug, kick off her heels, and say: "Why not? Could be fun." The Aldeburgh *Dream* reunites Rose with Bevan, who plays Tytania. "She's amazing," says Rose. "She just emanates joy and loveliness."

Rose has sung Superintendent Budd in *Albert Herring* and John Claggart, the malevolent master-at-arms, in *Billy Budd*, but his love of Bottom is boundless. "He's the kind of person who wants to make everything wonderful. I think he knows he's not the greatest actor in the world. He just has such enthusiasm for everything he does."

Preparing for Jones's production, he has been wondering whether there might be a Mrs Bottom. "Maybe he is married and just has a very normal life? The fact that he goes away and has this wild, passionate encounter is incredible. Maybe there is something lacking in his world."

Basses seldom get to enjoy an onstage romance. "There's a fairy and a donkey! That's the only heterosexual love music Britten wrote. And isn't that the most beautiful music, the stuff that he wrote for Tytania and Bottom?"



As Baron Ochs in *Der Rosenkavalier*
ALASTAIR MUIR/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

If Aldeburgh and Covent Garden are two focal points on Rose’s map of Britain, the third is Glyndebourne, a festival he believes offers “the ultimate operatic experience”. He grew up just five miles away. His family were not particularly musical — he remembers a cassette tape of Dvorák’s Ninth Symphony, a *Reader’s Digest* collection of Johann Strauss waltzes and the soundtrack to *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. Two teachers, one at primary school, one at secondary school, were instrumental in capturing his musical imagination. He remains in touch with both. His mother used to listen to Radio 4 all the time. Now, he says, she listens to Radio 3 and texts him whenever someone he knows is on.

Rose says his family are used to him being away all the time, but he describes himself as “damaged” by the break-up of a long-term relationship. “I spend six months of the year in America and six

months here. That's a very confusing situation to be in. I was very happily with someone and unfortunately because of not being together enough it fell to bits. It's not easy being away. You're away from the most important things in life. OK, you're singing in nice places and having nice meals and stuff, but at the end of the day that's not enough."

After the Aldeburgh *Dream* and Rose's festival recital of new works by Kate Whitley and Dominic Wills with the Albion Quartet, there are in his diary just a handful of UK appearances: Lucy Carter's semi-staging of *The Dream of Gerontius* with English National Opera, a concert performance of Elgar's *King Olaf*, and Hunding in *Die Walküre* at the Edinburgh International Festival. Apart from a run as the Grand Inquisitor in *Don Carlos* in Berlin, his base for the next few months will be the Met, first as Oroveso in a new production of *Norma*, then Colline in *La bohème*.

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There's a fairy and a donkey! It's the only heterosexual love music Britten wrote

He is sceptical about experimental productions from directors new to the form. "You can't expect just to walk into the opera world and be able to do something with it." Between body-shaming and the fetishisation of "barihunks", he thinks too much emphasis is placed on singers' appearances. He has not forgotten this paper's reference to his "moobs" when he sang Polyphemus in *Acis and Galatea* in 2009. "I didn't know what the word meant," he says with a laugh. "If I'd known I was going to be topless in that show I would probably

have done some work on it. They did try and make me a fat suit, but when I came to the first day of rehearsals, it was, like, ‘We don’t need the fat suit any more!’ ”

The impact of Britten’s work as a musician and educator doesn’t stop at Bottom. In July Rose will inaugurate the Scuola di belcanto in Urbania, Italy, extending what he learnt at Aldeburgh and the Curtis Institute to a new generation of singers. Having made his recital debut at Carnegie Hall in March, he wants “to recreate Graham Johnson’s Songmaker’s Almanac series [of lieder and song recitals], with [the singers] Paul Appleby and Erin Morley and Sasha Cooke and a couple of really fantastic pianists” in New York. Then he plans to teach at Aldeburgh next year.

Where has this restlessness come from? “I’ve always thought that my singing was going to lead to something else. It felt like Baron Ochs was a destination point. I’ve proved to the world that I can do this. Maybe it’s now time to press the pause button and concentrate on other things. I’m not going to stop singing, but singing is not going to be my priority like it has been.”

At 39, he seems too young for a midlife crisis, I say. “It’s not a midlife crisis. I’m at a point where I can make a choice. What an amazing gift. I’m very fortunate to be in that situation.”

***A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, June 9-14; Matthew Rose and the Albion Quartet, June 19, both at the Aldeburgh Festival (01728 687110), June 9-25**



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