

**'The Enjoyment of Opera' is dedicated to the memory of Kerstin who shared my
passion and got me there in time.**

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Preface

This volume of essays consists almost entirely of reprints of reviews of operas, published in the *Oxford Magazine* between 2002 and 2006. *Oxford Magazine* appears four times each University term in conjunction with the official University Gazette but is devoted to the free expression of views on academic, cultural and other matters. I am grateful to many readers and to the editors for the suggestion that these essays are worthy of wider dissemination. They are reprinted here only lightly edited, mainly to remove repetitious airing of prejudice and to provide cross-referencing. Some of the titles have been changed. The verses at the beginning and end of the book are commended entries in *Oxford Magazine's* Christmas competitions in 2004 and 2000 respectively: the first 'In Praise of the Opera' to compose a sonnet to some worthy endeavour, the second to summarize an epic in three limericks.

Apart from the operas, I include three book reviews, two reprinted from *Oxford Magazine* and the third, *Tosca's Rome*, with permission, from the *Eighteenth Century Current Bibliography*. The first two contributions to Chapter 2, 'Prima la Musica – please' and 'Open Letter' have not appeared in print before, while 'Thirty years of Welsh National Opera' first appeared in *Opera FRIEND*, the Magazine of the Friends of Welsh National Opera.

In the cause of readability I have avoided annotation and footnotes and the indexation is restricted to composers and to opera titles, distinguishing reviews from passing mention.

Finally, I must thank all those whose company has enhanced my enjoyment of opera and whose opinions have helped me form my own. I must stress that the opinions contained herein are my own and I stand by them!

Fanfare

In Praise of the Opera

The power of pen and rhyme I now engage
To laud the virtues of the operatic stage.
Four centuries of legend, drama, history here
Enhanced by music's power to entertain the ear.
To occupy the mind, the heart, the soul,
To enrich one's life is Opera's great role.
Its themes are many, representing all of life -
Love and public duty, domestic comedy and strife.
In creation and performance many people have a part:
Composers, writers, singers, players all deploy their art.
Directors and designers make or mar the finished play -
The opera itself will always live another day!
In versatile performance, one may stage it where one would
From Music Room of Holywell to Bowl of Hollywood.
So, let us all apply ourselves with zeal
To press our views of Opera's appeal.

Chapter 1 – How to Enjoy Opera

The Operatic Experience

A girlfriend from Denmark once told me a story about the philosopher Kierkegaard. At one time he was engaged to a girl who had never been to the opera. He invited her to go with him and spent the intervening period building up her expectations of the event. At the last minute, he had to admit that he did not actually have tickets but pointed to the pleasure she had received in the anticipation of the opera. The fiancée took the hint and broke off the engagement.

I tell this story because it reminds one that anticipation is a part of the enjoyment of an opera. Perhaps more than the other dramatic arts, to go to the opera on the spur of the moment is to miss a significant part of the whole experience. The choice of opera, reading up on the plot and reviews of the production is part of the experience. One may go further and say that what one sees and hears from the stage must be appreciated in the context of the opera house, the comfort of the seats, the company and a host of other details (one, not to be specified, in particular). Even broader, one brings to a particular performance memories of previous productions, previous appearances by the singers and players, and work of the directors, as well as knowledge of the opera. Although it is the opera lover's tendency to bang on about such memories that gives some justification to the charge of elitism, it is, nevertheless, my view that opera performances should be reviewed within this wider context. This is what I have attempted to do in the collection presented here.

Because of the popularity of opera throughout the world today it is, in any event, necessary to plan early to make sure of good seats. Having secured them, the ritual on the night is remarkably similar wherever one is. This was brought home to me many years ago when I found myself with a spare evening in Nice and had obtained a seat for *Un Ballo in Maschera* in a production I had earlier seen in Birmingham with almost the same cast. With an hour to spare, I found a nearby restaurant serving omelette and chips, as in Birmingham, and made my way to the opera house in pouring rain, as in Birmingham. The principal difference was that Nice had by far the most uncomfortable seats I had ever encountered. Nowadays the procedure in attending a new opera house is standard. One decides whether to take refreshment before, during or after the entertainment. It is a good idea to arrive as the doors are opening, find out the appropriate bar and (as is usually possible) place an order - smoked-salmon sandwiches (which have replaced omelette and chips) and sparkling wine, obtain a programme, and plan a departure strategy. After the performance, one either parties (less common as one ages) or returns home or to one's hotel for a nightcap and a perusal of the programme - to read the singers' biographies and the director's apologia. The choice of

nightcap is delicate. Instead of awarding stars to the performance, the outstanding rates an armagnac, the excellent, cognac, malt-whisky for the worthy down to chartreuse for the disasters.

An additional pleasure that I have discovered in the last few years is the self-imposed discipline of writing a review. Hence this work. This concentrates the mind during the performance – not just ‘am I enjoying this?’ but ‘why am I enjoying this?’. So often, people’s response to opera is an uncritical superlative, the intensity of its expression being the only measure of the quality. To answer the second question requires more subtlety: why does *Wozzeck* staged in a cannery succeed while *The Flying Dutchman* in a space station is a disaster. In writing these reviews I have striven to analyse the answers to such questions. I will not summarise any conclusions here; my ideas are developed throughout the book.

Next, a confession: this book is not about operatic superstars or gala performances, I never saw Callas. I never saw the Three Tenors, neither in concert nor individually on the stage. I saw the production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* in which Sutherland made her legendary début at Covent Garden but with Mattiwilda Dobbs in the title role. I have been equally unlucky when in transit around the world, finding only ballet in La Scala, Munich and Sydney! To me, opera has to be judged as a unified spectacle, music, singing, décor, staging and text (in the form of surtitles) and not dependent on only a few of these.

In this respect, I am extremely fortunate to have lived on the touring circuit of Welsh National Opera and my operatic experience is heavily dominated by their productions. Of the three hundred odd performances I have in my records, some eighty are WNO. For this reason they merit a separate chapter –Chapter 3 - Homage to Welsh National Opera.

I have summarised my own enthusiasm for opera. It is simplistic to assume it is the only point of view. We live in a Golden Age of opera production, as reference to any issue of any opera magazine will indicate. As well as in conventional opera houses, opera can be seen these days in Roman arenas, castles, country houses and gardens, warehouses, hospitals, prisons and schools. The repertoire extends from Monteverdi to Birtwistle and beyond. People attend opera for a multitude of reasons: some go for the spectacle, some go to hear great voices, some go for the music, some for the drama, some for the total operatic experience; some attend for corporate hospitality, some as an excuse for a picnic, some to try something new, some will know the opera, some will not, some few may go to be shocked or outraged. There are productions to suit all tastes - the problem is one of selection. Too often these days, the production has little respect for the content of the opera. One needs to be forewarned if it is to be a travesty of the composer's intention *before* committing oneself to attending. While one learns that

certain directors should be avoided, too often one is taking a gamble on what may prove to be unacceptable.

Reader's Guide

This is a book for dipping. The contents are arranged to aid this. They consist of a series of essays for the most part centred on particular performances of one or two operas. The four hundred years of great opera can be conveniently divided into three periods, the Classical, from 1600 to 1800 marked by Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607) to Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (1791), the Romantic, from *Fidelio* (1805) to Puccini and Richard Strauss in the early twentieth century, overlapping with the Modern, to the present day. This is the division I have made here in Chapters 5, 6, 7. Within each, operas are in order of performance. However, many of the essays cover wider issues than a particular opera and these are separated into other chapters. Thus, in Chapter 2 – Polemics, I have a go at figures of the operatic establishment from the viewpoint of the ordinary opera goer: one critic, two directors, one musician and one management. Chapter 3 is devoted to WNO productions. In Chapter 4 – Home and Abroad, an added interest is as much in the city, the opera house, the company. I hope that the book reviews in Chapter 8 will be read as much as further exposition of my views on opera as criticisms of the works. The list of contents gives the operas that are reviewed in each essay. An additional challenge I set is to try to summarise the plot of each opera in two or three sentences; I hope I convey the gist! *Der Ring des Nibelungen* presents a problem in this regard but you will find it reduced to three limericks as a Coda at the end of this book.

The Desert Island Question

I am often asked what my favourite opera is. In reply, I try to disguise the fact that I regard this as a silly question and explain that my favourite changes all the time according to mood, state of mind, what I have recently seen and heard, even the weather but to be prepared for the question I have a selection of a dozen operas without which I could not exist on a desert island. Here they are, without comment, in chronological order. Many of these receive reviews herein.

- ◆ Monteverdi – *L’Incoronazione di Poppea*
- ◆ Handel – *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*
- ◆ Gluck – *Iphigénie en Tauride*
- ◆ Mozart – *Le Nozze di Figaro*
- ◆ Beethoven – *Fidelio*
- ◆ Berlioz – *Les Troyens*
- ◆ Wagner – *Tristan und Isolde*

- ◆ Verdi – *Don Carlos*
- ◆ Verdi – *Falstaff*
- ◆ Strauss – *Der Rosenkavalier*
- ◆ Britten – *Peter Grimes*
- ◆ Birtwistle – *The Second Mrs Kong*

My luxury would be an opera house (Dresden, Riga or Mozart's theatre in Prague would do) together with a full company and the WNO orchestra. CDs and DVDs are no good. Opera is a live, three-dimensional, audio-visual experience. Nothing less is acceptable.

Chapter 2 – Polemics

Three elements contribute to the experience of an opera: the words, the music and the staging, the work respectively of the librettist, the composer and the director. The relation and balance between these elements is a complex matter; it has changed much over the four centuries of opera. The question has itself formed the subject of operas – the relation between words and music from Salieri, *Prima la Musica e poi le Parole* (1786), to Richard Strauss, *Capriccio* (1942), the relation between the creators and interpreters from the little-known Viennese Florian Leopold Gassmann, *Opera Seria* (1769) (a wonderful send-up), to Strauss, again, *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912-16) (see ‘The Agony and the Ecstasy’, Chapter 3). The first problem rumbles on. Harrison Birtwistle in a radio interview about his *The Second Mrs Kong* tactlessly remarked that it was important the audience understood some of the words, got the gist of more and the rest didn’t matter. The second conflict remains a question of deep seriousness, fundamental to the future of opera.

The first operas were written as contributions to court occasions. These were the circumstances of the commissioning of Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* by the Duke of Mantua, to keep up with the Gonzaga’s next door. The spectacle came first. There followed a long period where the words came first; indeed the same texts received different settings by different composers. This lasted until the late eighteenth century, the time of Gluck when collaboration between composer and librettist began culminating in the first great partnership, Mozart and da Ponte. Throughout the nineteenth century it was recognized words and music go together. The subject of the, sometimes stormy, relations between composer and librettist is a book in itself!

Prima la musica - please

On 30 October 2001, an article appeared in *Times2* by Rodney Milnes, then opera critic of *The Times*, in which he claimed that when it came to staging opera, the text was all-important. This seemed to me to be so misconceived that I felt compelled to write to him. This letter represents the first time I put pen to paper on the subject of opera production. I reprint it here since the subject is still pertinent.

1 November 2001

Dear Mr Milnes

I read, with some astonishment, your article in *Times2* on Tuesday, October 30. I find it hard to believe that a critic of your eminence can be so fundamentally wrong when it comes to setting out the general principles that should underline the staging of opera. I find it particularly extraordinary that a critic of opera can dismiss with such contempt the power of music to develop a coherent dramatic point of view. You say ‘music never says the

same thing to any two people'. Is this true of *Fidelio*, of *Rosenkavalier*, of any great opera composer?

You say the text alone is the basis of interpretation. But the text alone is the basis of the composer's interpretation. It is the task of the director to support the composer's interpretation. If he is not prepared to do so, he should provide his own music. The words 'I love you' can be spoken in many ways. The composer writes music which selects a particular feeling. If the director does not have the musical sensitivity to understand the composer's interpretation, he has no business directing opera in the first place. Time and time again, talking to those involved with the musical side of opera one hears the complaint 'if only the director would listen to the music'.

Good modern productions show that imaginative and innovative staging can be achieved in sympathy with the composer's interpretation of the text. At random I would pick Glyndebourne's *Pelléas et Melisande* and the production of *Hansel and Gretel* you mention in your article (though I hated it). The problem arises with opera managements who give directors a free hand to impose their petty obsessions on great masterpieces regardless of the musical context. This may or may not be a legitimate theatrical enterprise but it needs to be distinguished from the genuine opera production. For the sake of the customer (particularly the new opera goer), the management should advertise such productions as 'based on the opera by'. It is absurd that on the musical side these same productions are often accompanied by striving after genuine sound production with 'period' instruments and styles of singing. Logically the orchestration and singing should be modernised also. I have the horrible feeling that one day this will happen again, as it has in the past!

Opera production should be a unity of text, music and staging. This is the essential point you seem to miss in your article. The importance of the text has been enormously enhanced by the introduction of surtitles (another subject on which I usually disagree with you). I have seen four productions of *Jenufa*, all first-rate in both music and staging. (Is there ever a bad production of Janáček?) By far the most enjoyable was WNO's 1998 production because the quality of the surtitles made it so much more meaningful. But how often one finds surtitles which contradict what is happening on the stage! Unity is all-important. One does not want to have to close one's eyes to concentrate on the music, at the expense of some unrelated nonsense on the stage, any more than one wants to close one's ears to seek some profound revelation from the action and the displayed text!

I hope I may provoke a response!

Yours sincerely

I didn't!

The next two essays are directed at directors. Directors hold a dictatorial role in opera today, their dominance being enshrined in the contractual terms of others involved. This sometimes take to giving them *carte blanche* to impose their own obsessions and hang-ups on the production, rather than aiming at a unified realisation of the intentions of the composer and the librettist. This is bad for opera. In contrast, the following 'Dido dissected' reports a musician-director in action. To blame for this situation are not the directors themselves but the companies who employ them and give them a free hand. But opera companies have their own problem, aired in the second pair of operas above; this is 'who pays the piper calls the tune'. These days it is often public funding bodies, whose pressure to dumb down the activity has to be resisted. This is treated in 'Reaching Out', which completes the chapter.

Open Letter

Graham Vick is a director who used to be held in great respect by most opera goers, with a string of memorable productions. The first I saw was Scottish Opera Go Round, *The Elixir of Love*, to the more recent *Die Meistersinger* at Covent Garden and a boldly imaginative *Pelléas et Melisande* at Glyndebourne. Now, alas, he is on my list of directors to avoid. While at Glyndebourne, he directed the three Mozart da Ponte operas, going from bad to worse. *Don Giovanni* was unspeakable. A year later we saw his version of *Il Trovatore* at the New York Met but only after the worst excesses had been removed as had his name from the programme. In the lecture referred to below, he almost admitted that part of his intention was to shock the Met audience out of its complacency. (This is not an unworthy motive: the day before we had seen a performance of *Nabucco* in which a 'spontaneous' encore of *Va pensiero* had already been timed into the *Live from the Met* broadcast around the world.)

In spite of my harsh words, Vick was a very stimulating incumbent of the Hambro Chair of Opera at Oxford University in 2003. The following was prompted by his inaugural lecture 'The Age of the Audience'.

Dear Professor Vick

I would like to express my appreciation of your Inaugural Lecture given on 18 November. This was a fascinating and stimulating statement of your views on the present state of opera. Perhaps it will not surprise you that I disagree with some of your conclusions!

I write as a member of the audience in your 'Age of the Audience' lecture, though I should say at the outset that I am one who would prefer to attend *Fidelio* wearing a tie and without a hood covering my head. I believe that my views will represent those of many opera goers and therefore should be of some interest to you. Over the years I have seen some dozen of your productions. It is a very impressive list of memorable operatic experiences, with sensitive and subtle productions, starting with the 'Scottish Opera Go Round' version of *The Elixir of Love* seen at the Oxford Playhouse in 1976. It is therefore all the more saddening that two of your recent productions, one at Glyndebourne and one in New York have followed a modern trend of unsuitable and inappropriate staging under the guise of offering a contemporary re-interpretation of the opera. From the point of view of your audience, this means at least a temporary loss of faith in your productions.

You said that the Age of the Audience succeeds the Age of the Producer (I suppose succeeding in turn the ages of the conductor, the composer, the singer and the librettist). Whatever the case, the director must take some share of the blame for the present state of opera as you described it. One thinks twice about dispensing the exorbitant sums necessary for an evening at the opera in this country with a full view of the stage, when there is the danger of having one's attention ruined by some grotesque nonsense on the stage. (A recent trip to Covent Garden to see the revival of your fine production of *Die Meistersinger* cost as much as a weekend in Toulouse to see a new, imaginative production of *Siegfried*, which, incidentally, showed how one may give a modern twist to the performance without appearing anachronistic.) It is ridiculous that at a time when one is striving for authentic musical sound, with period instruments and attention to the original style of performance, one is confronted in the staging with something in direct conflict with this spirit. Of course staging and performance styles should move with the times but they should not move in opposite directions!

The other topic on which I wish to take issue with you is the question of language and the role of surtitles, again speaking for the audience. You stated the case for singing in the vernacular as if it were black and white. It is not. You have to admit that the *sound* of an opera depends on the language in which it is sung and therefore the matter is debatable. There is no argument with companies such as ENO, which always perform in English as a matter of policy; one knows where one stands. Some operas are written for the voice in such a way that the words are unintelligible in any language, so they are best heard in the original. Otherwise it is a matter for discussion between the producer and the musical director - intelligibility versus sound. For the audience it is a matter of choice. My own view is that the 'lighter' the opera the more acceptable is English, whereas the 'grander' the opera, the more appropriate the sound of the original language. But one cannot generalise.

Some of the best Wagner productions I have seen have been in English. With a great musical interpretation it does not seem to matter.

The question of language has, of course, been completely transformed by the advent of surtitles (with seat-back titles to come). I am astonished that you seem unaware of the immeasurable enrichment of the operatic experience it is to have the possibility of following in detail what is going on. To my mind, this is what the age of the audience is all about! Operas in English should not need surtitles, some operas don't need them, but in most cases one can gain much and lose nothing by their presence. But they are not easy to use, self-discipline is required to gain their full benefit; you rightly pointed to the danger of becoming hypnotised at the expense of the music and the action! Judicious reference to the surtitles, however, can enhance one's appreciation of the opera. Personally, I would single out the Italian operas of Handel and the operas of Janáček. In the former case, it is the only way to follow the intricacies of the plot and hence to fully appreciate the emotions expressed in the arias. Janáček is the supreme example of a composer who should be sung in the original, because the music follows so closely the rhythms of the language. (I know I disagree here with many renowned critics!) I have seen many productions of *Jenufa*, in English, in Czech, with and without surtitles. All were first rate, impressive productions both musically and in staging. The most enriching experience was one where well written surtitles enabled one to follow the subtleties of the dialogue. Needless to say, no credit was given to the translator in the programme!

Admittedly, the surtitles are sometimes awful, following the worst traditions of opera translation. But such is their importance these days that I hope it is part of the director's job to ensure that they accurately represent the text. I can understand why some directors dislike them for often what one reads on the screen directly contradicts what is happening on the stage! This is very irritating to the audience.

I wish you success in your efforts to win a wider audience for opera. That this is a new and a different audience and a different style of production is admirable. But how do you then wean them to appreciate the mainstream of operatic production for which there remains an insatiable demand? Not everyone wants to be outraged by irrelevant nonsense on the stage. What is required is a convention for indicating the nature of the production in the advanced publicity. It is simplistic to believe that only new styles of production will satisfy the wide range of operatic tastes.

For my own part, I shall continue to wear a tie when attending opera performances.

Yours most sincerely

'Liturgies'

Phyllida Lloyd: '*Between two worlds*' – the relationship of plays and opera, Cameron Mackintosh Lecture, St Catherine's College, 6 March. Puccini: *La Bohème*, 1 March; Verdi: *Rigoletto*, 2 March, Ellen Kent and Opera International, New Theatre, Oxford.

Consider the following three propositions: (i) The problem with opera is the orchestra pit, which separates the cast from the audience. (ii) Operas should, ideally, be sung in the majority language of the audience; the problem with surtitles is that they detract from direct communication between singers and audience. (iii) 'Traditional' productions which follow faithfully the opera as written are mere 'liturgies'.

These propositions were contained in Phyllida Lloyd's revealing and thought-provoking inaugural lecture as this year's Cameron Mackintosh Visiting Professor of Theatre Studies. The title of the lecture was 'Between two worlds – the relationship of plays and opera'. I attended hoping to gain some insight into the different nature of these two forms of the performing arts from this experienced and versatile director. Her recent achievements include the stage play *Mary Stuart*, the ENO *Ring* cycle and the musical, *Mamma mia*. Professor Lloyd distinguished two types of opera production, from the director's point of view: those which act as a vehicle for international superstars, who have more profitable activities than attending rehearsals, and opera companies where directors have a period of time to develop a production with the singers and to impose their stamp on the performance. What was missing from her discourse appeared to be any recognition of the essential difference between plays and opera – the constraints imposed by the composer and the music. Both forms are based on stories related by a cast of characters. In plays, the words are spoken, in natural or more formal or declamatory language at the discretion of the director. In opera, the words are sung - not a normal form of communication. Opera requires the intervention of a composer who has already imposed an interpretation on the telling of the story, often worked out in close collaboration with a librettist. This has to be respected. To reduce the discussion of the problems of producing Wagner to that of handling the singers as a bunch of stroppy actors can hardly be all there is to it!

Such is the power of present day directors (including constraining the performers in contractual straight jackets) that they are sometimes tempted to overlook this essential difference and to impose their interpretation of the *story* rather than interpreting the *opera* - and not only those raving egocentrics sometimes let loose by opera companies on their loyal supporters. The three propositions indicate the danger. It is remarkable that Graham Vick enunciated the first two of these, in almost identical terms in his lecture as Hambro Professor of Opera a few years ago. The right place for the orchestra is between audience and stage so that the conductor, not the director, can control the performance. There is no doubt that surtitles have transformed the experience of opera for most opera goers. They

enable one to follow in detail the stories of operas sung in the original language, which is the musical ideal. It can be inconvenient for the director that they may not be consistent with what is happening on the stage. When directors speak of winning new audiences to opera, what they often mean is to exploit the emotional power of the music to present a travesty of the form and the content. This may not be theatrically illegitimate (Vick's Birmingham Opera Company, Glyndebourne's new *School 4 Lovers*), provided that it is made clear that it is 'based on the opera' and is not necessarily an opera at all.

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The above remarks may be regarded as a preamble to a review of two stupendous productions by Ellen Kent's Opera International, this time combining the forces of the Chisinau National Opera and the Ukrainian National Opera of Odessa, previously heard in Oxford in separate productions. The latter provided its fine orchestra – stronger than that of the Chisinau Company. The conductor in Oxford was Yarema Skibinsky. The operas were the ever-popular *La Bohème*, directed by Chisinau's Eugen Platon and *Rigoletto* by the Ukrainian Sergei Zuenko. The productions were faithful to the composer and librettist, the staging traditional and the language original, the surtitles enlightening (particularly in revealing the subtlety of the dialogue in the former opera). The enthusiastic full houses represented a wider cross-section of the community than do our other visiting companies. Liturgies they may have been but both firmly based, with only slight distraction, on the genius of the composers in the hands of superb performers.

I may be becoming sentimental as I grow older, but for the first time in my life my eyes were not dry at the end of *Bohème*. But the credit must go to the performers – the solo and ensemble singing and the acting. Foremost was the Mimi, Irina Vinogradova, endowed with a most beautiful voice and dramatic ability to go with it. Ruslan Zinevych as Rodolfo partnered her. He started a little tentatively but by the end their performance together was deeply moving. Admirable support was provided by Musetta and the three companions. If Elena Gherman as Musetta lacked some of the flamboyance required by her role in the early scenes, the Marcello of Petro Racovita was outstanding.

When the curtain went up, introducing the four bohemians, one settled back, in the expectation that this was to be a fine production. The horseplay of the four young men and Mimi's first appearance were beautifully staged and one's enjoyment was enhanced by being able to follow the dialogue in detail through the surtitles. Unfortunately, the second act was a disappointment. The crowd scenes appeared under-rehearsed and chaotic, musically lacking in animation. The dramatically weak Act III was not enhanced in this production but provided the transition to the climactic Act IV, which was superb in every respect. In summary, a flawed but ultimately extremely moving production. Whatever the weaknesses, it all came together at the end.

For *Rigoletto*, Ellen Kent had assembled a cast that would grace the stage of the Royal Opera House. It was led by the doyen of the Chisinau Opera, Vladimir Dragos, whose talents are becoming familiar to followers of this Company. In voice and gesture he gave a great old-fashioned melodramatic performance of the title role. Gilda was sung in Oxford by another soprano of outstanding quality— Maria Tonina, her *Caro Nome* meriting a very high mark. In the final ensemble their voices were well matched by those of Andriy Perfilov as the Duke of Mantua and Tatiana Virlan, Madalena. Perfilov gave a good account of the role but, as always, suffered the handicap of having to compete, in his excerpt arias, with our memories of recordings of all the world's greatest tenors of the last century! There were no weak links in the cast with notable portrayals of Monterone (Viorel Zgordan), Giovanna (Roddica Picireanu) and Sparafucile (Dmytro Pavlyuk).

In the advance publicity we were asked to note ‘some scenes contain nudity’ and that the production featured ‘a magnificent golden eagle’. (Such gimmicks are a trademark of Ellen Kent productions.) The latter made a dignified appearance in the first scene, while the naked and semi-naked ladies added an extra spice of debauchery to the Court of the Duke of Mantua in Acts I and II, though by the end of Act II they had rather exhausted their repertoire of seductive wiles! The whole staging was fast-paced and exciting, transitional scenes being enacted before a black proscenium curtain, without any interruption. The only slight weakness was the rather inflexible conductor’s beat, preventing the orchestral accompaniment from making a full impact. But this was a major triumph by any standard! One looks forward to the new production of *Die Fledermaus* due in Oxford in December 2006.

As drama, these two operas are contrasted in the universality of their plots. *La Bohème* is firmly anchored to a time and place where young women died of consumption in unheated garrets. The story of *Rigoletto*, on the other hand could be set in any time in history from Ancient Rome to the present day where similar macho elements of society exist (fun-loving or depraved, according to one’s point of view). Indeed, Jonathan Miller’s renowned *mafioso* version is having yet another revival. A recent episode of *Footballers’ Wives* (viewed inadvertently, I assure you) had a poolside party strangely reminiscent of Ellen Kent’s Act I. A version of *Rigoletto* set in the world of professional football could well pull in a new audience for opera. If that’s what you want.

Dido dissected.

Judith Weir, Thomas Allen, Phillip Gossett and Graham Vick are previous incumbents of the Hambro Chair of Opera, generously endowed by Mrs Robin Hambro. They have provided enlightenment not only to the faculty but have proved stimulating to a wider audience in their public lectures and revelatory in their master classes. The 5th Hambro Professor, Sir John Eliot Gardiner, can be no exception. To mark his

inauguration, a week of public events was organised by Michael Burden on behalf of the Faculty of Music. This included Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, performed by New Chamber Opera Studio and Sir John's inaugural lecture entitled 'Opera; why bother?'. These were followed by two master classes 'Purcell's *Dido Dissected*', one with members of the Studio Opera, the other an open rehearsal with his own Monteverdi Choir (whose fortieth anniversary is celebrated this year) and Orchestra.

John Eliot Gardiner is well known for his many performances and recordings of music using instruments of the period of composition. This has not been without controversy. The sound often seems thin to modern ears and it begs the question of what the composer intended. Many composers (and performers) have striven for a richer and fuller tone than that of the forces available to them; without this tension modern instruments and the modern symphony orchestra would never have evolved. (It was said of Wanda Landowska that if she were to 'improve' her harpsichord any further, she was in danger of reinventing the piano.) There is a case to be made for performing works with the resources of a generation after their composition! I have tended to share the view of Jan-Pascal Tortelier that Gardiner performs with period instruments in period style and in period costume - and records with period microphones. However this is perhaps not entirely fair. I treasure the memory of his conducting two of Bach's Easter Cantatas in Erfurt, part of his 2000 Bach anniversary pilgrimage performing and recording Bach cantatas in the churches of Europe. Either I suffered a conversion or his sound has matured.

It was announced before the start of *Dido and Aeneas* that this was intended as a run through in preparation for the master class later in the week. It was, nevertheless, a very polished performance, semi-staged under the baton of Stephen Rice. Although the stringed instruments were modern, to a non-trained ear the sound seemed authentic, though some of the dotted rhythms could have been a little more 'in period'. The principals, Kathryn Whitney and David Stuart, Kate Semmens (Belinda) and Maciek O'Shea (Sorceress), produced a uniformly beautiful sound, as did those members of the nine-strong chorus singing the minor roles. The idea of giving the role of sorceress to a male voice worked well. The staging was subtle and effective. *However*, and it is sad to have to report this, hardly a word of what was being sung could be heard. It was as if the singers were concentrating too much on producing a beautiful, unbroken musical line rather than projecting the text to the audience. The exception was Oliver Morris as the sailor, though on the whole the male voices were clearer than the women's. It is hard to account for this (a general feeling in the audience). Some blamed the acoustics of the Holywell Music Room, though during the recent Lieder Festival, it proved to be an ideal venue for clarity of vocal music and there is no reason why Purcell should be different. In a fascinating master class at the Lieder Festival, the accompanist Julius Drake advised a young singer: 'Don't try to sing the words - try to communicate them'. This had an immediate and dramatic effect. This should apply, above all, to opera. Maybe I am being unfair to the singers and there is some previously unremarked acoustical effect associated with an instrumental group occupying the floor of the Music Room.

On the Thursday, Gardiner gave his inaugural lecture - 'Opera; why bother?'. (This started an hour late, due to yet another blockage in our main road artery to London.) He gave an off the cuff summary of the history of opera from Monteverdi to Mozart with the challenging thesis, as a subject for discussion, that opera began and ended with Monteverdi, with the exception of Rameau. His denigration of Handel's Italian operas for their formulaic recitative - da capo aria structure does not take account of the dramatic and emotional impact this format can have on an audience, beating anything written by Handel's French contemporaries.

Deliberately I wrote the above review of the opera, before attending the events of the Friday. It is in the spirit of master classes for the spectators to listen to the performance and to form their own opinion before listening to the tutor's analysis and suggestions. I will only comment that I learnt from some that the words were perfectly audible from the back of the Music Room. The morning was devoted to a run through of the opera, with Gardiner's comments. On this occasion the singers' support was a wonderful three-piece continuo provided by English Baroque Soloists, which gave an immediate uplift to the singers and their audibility. One really felt for Kathryn Whitney (Dido) who had to alter completely her interpretation of the opening scene. But she and the rest of the cast responded brilliantly to Gardiner's coaching, which noticeably raised the general level of performance as it progressed. The clue was meticulous attention to voicing of consonants, vowels and aspirates together with a freer coupling of the vocal line to the accompaniment.

The afternoon was a real treat for the audience. First we heard the Monteverdi Choir and Orchestra in commentated excerpts from the opera (with a really wicked sorceress - Frances Bourne) This was followed by a performance of a late work by Purcell, *Saul and the Witch of Endor*, for three voices and organ, introduced by an erudite discussion of the changing symbolic meaning of sorcery during the composer's lifetime. To conclude, we heard a performance of the opera by the Monteverdi players with a fifteen-piece orchestra plus four continuo players and an eleven-strong chorus. Every word was audible! There is absolutely nothing wrong with the acoustics of the Holywell Music Room. They are near perfect even with such large forces. It was an immense privilege to have been present on this occasion and deepest thanks are due, not only to Sir John, but also to everyone else who made it possible.

Reaching Out

It is a feature of modern life that bodies seeking sponsorship or public funding for their activities are required to make strenuous efforts to make them accessible to as wide a public as possible. Gone are the days when applications for support were judged purely on some intrinsic worth of the endeavour - an approach now universally, sometimes justly, sometimes not, condemned as elitist. This

phenomenon, known as 'outreach', applies equally to grants of a few hundreds of pounds from a local council to support a local musical festival to hundreds of millions for a new 'must-have' particle accelerator to advance the frontiers of physics. In the field of the arts, outreach can work two ways. At its best it can lead to a fresh approach, blowing away outworn tradition; on the other hand, it can lead to a disgraceful dumbing down of the activity with a consequent corruption of standards or, even worse, to seeking popularity by being sexually explicit or otherwise outrageous. In science, analogously, it can either lead to a genuine effort to direct one's research in the direction of providing human benefit or, on the other hand, to produce specious arguments claiming bogus 'applicability' to justify inferior research.

These reflections are stimulated by two of the subjects of this review. One is Glyndebourne's commissioned opera, *Tangier Tattoo*, aimed at attracting new audiences of 'young' people in the age range 18-30. The other, marking the World Year of Physics, 2005, involved an extended lecture on 'Superstrings' by Brian Foster of the Department of Physics interpolated with violin solos played by Jack Liebeck, followed by an evening concert of Einstein's favourite music for violin and piano (played by Stephen de Pledge).

Our opera companies all adopt different methods to try to woo new audiences (and I leave out of account many worthy programmes for schools and similar). Some, like the Royal Opera House adopt a favourable pricing policy, Opera North, by producing a sampler, *á la carte* programme of one-actors, some, to their shame, by sensational and scandalous productions, some by novel forms of production, such as Graham Vick's Birmingham Opera Company, intimately involving the audience and banning the wearing of ties. English National mounts musicals and plays out its internal power struggles in the media. Some companies, such as Ellen Kent's Opera International reach out by letting the operas speak for themselves. Glyndebourne Opera's effort specifically to attract audiences in the 18-30 age range is *Tangier Tattoo*, recently on tour. After much heart-searching, I have to say in all honesty that I find this completely misconceived and misguided.

I quote from GoT's publicity: *Ask a group what springs to mind when they hear the word 'opera' and invariably the response includes fat ladies, Viking helmets, ridiculously drawn out death scenes and singing that is loud enough to shatter glass.* This stereotype response sounds like typical focus group rubbish adopting suggestions from the leader - apart from the fact that in respect of many of the greatest operas the stereotype is true. However, the way to defeat this stereotype is not to produce an opera in which the ladies are slim, death is instantaneous and the singing is so quiet that it requires electronic amplification. The plot of this 'operatic thriller' is a thin tale of a gap-year student who becomes involved with a group of shady characters after being landed with a suitcase full of dollars after a café shoot-out. This is the second fallacy - that to attract young people to opera you write about characters with whom they might identify. It is as if *La Bohème* was commissioned to attract struggling artists and writers to attend the opera. Just the mention of another

opera brings out the inferior nature of this offering - no tunes, no vocal highlights. The only dramatic tension is provided by the visual effects - the cleverly designed moving set and the sinister lighting providing an effective atmosphere. But as an introduction to the appreciation of opera it leads nowhere.

The inadequacy of *Tangier Tattoo* is even more cruelly exposed by its inclusion in a tour which includes Peter Hall's production of *La Cenerentola* from the 2005 Glyndebourne Festival. Anyone, young or old, not won over to opera by such a production is not worth bothering with. The audience was enlivened by enthusiastic groups of young people (wrongly mistaken for binge-drinkers outside the theatre beforehand). The opera, described as 'Cinderella without the supernatural,' is much more than that. In this production the characters come over as real people rather than as pantomime figures. Cinderella immediately establishes her generous nature in offering food to the Prince Ramiro's tutor, the philosopher Alidoro disguised as a beggar. The sibling rivalry of Clorinda and Tisbe, and the hinted-at inappropriate paternal behaviour of Don Magnifico made this a family one could believe in. They become involved in Ramiro's convoluted attempt to find a wife by holding a party at which he swaps places with his valet Dandini. Sitcom transcended!

Once one accepted that it was not the WNO orchestra conducted by Rizzi, the playing was found to be a more than adequate accompaniment for some marvellous singing and subtle characterisation. Particularly amusing was Giorgio Caodura as Dandini, savouring his role in the Prince's place. Also remarkable was Henry Waddington as Don Magnifico, giving a fully rounded representation. We felt for Mathew Beale (Ramiro) who appeared to have strained his voice by the time he came to his last two numbers. The star of the show was undoubtedly Christine Rice as Cenerentola, going from strength to strength in her vocal gymnastics. Several people with more experience of the opera than me remarked that this was the best interpretation they had ever seen.

How refreshing to have a director in Peter Hall totally dedicated to the opera as it is. The only misjudgement was the banging of windows, an annoying distraction from full appreciation of one of the greatest storm representations in all music.

2005 was designated the World Year of Physics in commemoration of the centenary of Einstein's *annus mirabilis*, the year of his great scientific advances, including the Special Theory of Relativity, with the aim of bringing the excitement of physics to the public and to inspire a new generation of scientists. The lecture entitled 'Superstrings' by Brian Foster, with musical interludes played by Jack Liebeck, (delivered in an unheated Holywell Music Room) was the last of some thirty performances given by this duo around the world as their contribution to Einstein Year, 2005. The lecture, devised for schools and the general public but not without moments of illumination for those with a scientific background, covered the history of the century of scientific discovery in physics, transmitting not only the sequence of discovery but also the excitement and enthusiasm of those engaged in it. From

Einstein's initial concept of Special Relativity, the lecture led us through the development of quantum theory and particle physics (leading to the current quark, lepton, neutrino picture) to the realisation of the basic incompatibility of general relativity and quantum theory and current attempts to resolve the matter with the eponymous superstrings in eleven dimensions. The parts of the lecture were divided by movements from Bach's music for solo violin, emphasising Einstein's love of the instrument, and concluded with a duet for two violins by Boccherini, in which the lecturer proved to be no mean violinist himself.

The evening gala concert, celebrating the World Year of Physics, was given by Liebeck in partnership with the pianist Stephen de Pledge. They formed a remarkable duo. Liebeck plays a 1785 Guadagnini violin, which has a very unusual timbre - more than that of a viola. Although only four years younger than the Mozart sonata which opened the programme, it was ideally suited to the major work of the recital, Brahms' G major Sonata. (It is recorded that Einstein struggled with this while still at school.) This is one of the most elusive works of the violin and piano repertoire. Its ambivalence is contained in the tempo markings *vivace* *ma non troppo* (my underlining) and *allegro molto moderato* of the first and last movements. To many players, the sonata is calm and contemplative in mood throughout, with the last movement *allegro molto-moderato*. It will, however, sustain a more vigorous and extrovert interpretation, such as it received here, ending *allegro-molto moderato*. The programme continued with *Five Madrigal Stanzas* by Martinů, dedicated to, and first performed, by Einstein; it concluded with a persuasive account of the rarely performed Sonata in F major by Dvořák.

All in all the day's entertainment was a splendid example of a Grand Unification of the Two Cultures!

Chapter 3 – Homage to Welsh National Opera

This chapter contains an overview of Welsh National Opera productions over the thirty years to 2003 when the opera theatre at the Wales Millennium Centre opened its doors, followed by reviews of their productions seen since then. In the first essay, I set out the operatic likes, dislikes and prejudices against which I may be judged. The ‘homage’ that follows is not uncritical. Where I am harsh, it is more in sorrow than in anger (with one exception).

Thirty years of WNO - A personal reminiscence

With the opening of the Wales Millennium Centre as the new home of Welsh National Opera, most thoughts are with the future of the Company under its new roof. However, it seems also an appropriate moment to cast one's mind back over past successes and to pay tribute to the amazing stream of outstanding productions emanating from the small resources of Cardiff's New Theatre. As a long-standing Oxford Friend, I would like to give a personal impression of WNO productions that I have seen since 1973. This is the date of the first WNO production of which I kept a record, *Don Carlos*, a turning point in my appreciation of opera. It turned me from a normal opera lover into an obsessive!

To many, the main strength of the WNO is the chorus. Yes, it is good, but what is so special about WNO is the orchestra. This is a wonderful, sensitive, instrument that has reigned supreme over the whole period, able to respond to the demands of its successive musical directors and visiting conductors. In opera houses throughout Europe and further afield, one rarely comes across a sound that can match it. It is particularly powerful in Wagner and Verdi - most recently in Jurowski's interpretation of *Parsifal* - but always gives wonderful support to the singers.

The list of WNO productions I have seen reflects my prejudices. I will go to anything by Wagner and anything by Janáček (a speciality of the company), I will see anything directed by Peter Stein. I will be selective about new productions of the better known works of Mozart, Verdi or Richard Strauss. I try to avoid Puccini, *Carmen* (not because it is not a great opera but because it is so difficult to perform convincingly) and Calixto Bieito. It is invidious to pick out singers from so many wonderful performances but I cannot resist mentioning the stalwarts Helen Field, Suzanne Murphy, Jeffrey Lawton and Dennis O'Neill who have given especial pleasure.

I conclude this article by recalling just twelve almost perfect productions from the period but, first, let me remind the reader of some of the less well-known of the operatic repertory, productions of which made a lasting impression. I list them alphabetically by composer: *Leonore* (2001), *Beatrix and Benedict* (1994), *The Turn of the Screw* (1999), *Jephtha* (2003), *Cendrillon* (1993), *Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* (1975), *The Carmelites* (1999), *Queen of Spades* (2000). Nor must one forget the two WNO commissions, John Metcalf's hauntingly beautiful tale of the clash of cultures between the Arctic and the

Welsh Valleys, *Tornrak* (1990), well-deserving of a revival, and Maxwell Davies' worthy *The Doctor of Myddfai* (1996).

Lest I appear unduly adulatory, I must also recall the occasional disaster. I exclude the aberrations of the above mentioned Bieito (because I refused to see them) but include *Tamburlaine* (1982), with a bare white set with an equestrian statue and not the slightest hint that this is one of Handel's greatest music dramas, *Der Freischütz* (1989) - a production completely lacking in dramatic tension - and *Nabucco* (1995), with a totally inappropriate staging.

Here is my representative selection of twelve outstanding productions since 1973:

Verdi: *Don Carlos* (1973) - produced by Michael Geliot, under the baton of Richard Armstrong. I can recall almost every detail of this marvellous production, in particular the handling of the forces, both musically and in stage management, in the *auto da fé* scene. Janáček: *Jenufa* (1975), *From the House of the Dead* (1982). All the Pountney, Björnson, Armstrong, Janáček productions are worthy of inclusion in this list. I choose the original *Jenufa*, which was my first exposure to the extraordinary dramatic impact of this composer and *From the House of the Dead* (Armstrong's own favourite), another shattering experience! Another close contender is the 1998 *Jenufa*, directed by Katie Mitchell, remarkable for the brilliant surtitles which enabled one to appreciate the subtleties of the drama as never before.

Monteverdi: *The Coronation of Poppea* (1980) - not the insensitive send-up of 1998, which totally missed the subtlety of this great tragicomedy, but the deliciously uninhibited version of 1980 by Michael Geliot with the modesty of many members of the cast only protected by a gauze curtain covering the proscenium; with Helen Field and Arthur Davies.

Tchaikowski: *Eugene Onegin* (1980). With the sounds of Amanda Roocroft and Garry Magee still ringing in our ears, it may seem perverse to express a preference for the 1980 production by Andrei Serban but I have no doubt that this was, overall, a greater operatic experience. Vocally, the cast led by Thomas Allen and Josephine Barstow, was equally strong; the letter scene was more sensitively performed, the last act more convincing. But what were special were the set designs of Michael Yeargan with the real cornfield in the opening act. The sets of the 2004 version were not worthy of the production.

Strauss: *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* (1981). This was a bold production of this mammoth opera with a richness of costumes and décor to match that of the voices and the music.

Verdi: *Un ballo in Maschera* (1983). One of Dennis O'Neill's greatest roles, in Järvefelt's genuine representation of Swedish court life, full of imaginative details.

Verdi: *Otello* (1986), *Falstaff* (1988). These productions of Verdi's last operas, directed by Peter Stein and conducted by Armstrong, must rate among the best ever! Who can forget the staging of the storm scene opening *Otello*, leading to Jeffrey Lawton's entry and through to Helen Field's willow song at the end, with Donald Maxwell as evil Iago. Maxwell also sang Falstaff, not, perhaps, with the charisma of better known interpreters of the role but Stein's overall control of the movements of the cast made this also a memorable experience.

Gluck: *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1997) - little known but one of the greatest of baroque operas. This production by Caurier and Leiser was one of the most moving opera experiences of a lifetime, thanks to the heart-rending performance of Diana Montague in the title role.

Wagner: *Tristan und Isolde* (1999) - another difficult choice between this and the 1980 production, prepared (and recorded) by Goodall but conducted in Oxford by Armstrong with Mitchinson and Johanna Meier. The 1999 production, with Geffrey Lawton, in his last appearance, and Mary Lloyd-Davis, conducted by Rizzi, just wins the accolade.

Britten: *Peter Grimes* (1999) - the most recent of Peter Stein's productions for WNO, this reminded me of the original production at Sadler's Wells in 1945, with the additional bonus of Stein's choreography of the crowd scenes. Despite the chauvinistic carping of certain critics, Carlo Rizzi's interpretation of the score and the direction were absolutely authentic.

Two Nights at the Opera

Verdi: *Il Trovatore*, Wednesday, 22 October; Wagner: *Parsifal*, Saturday 25 October 2003

The Welsh National Opera marked its first visit to the new New Theatre by presenting new productions of *Il Trovatore* and *Parsifal* (as well as a revival of *Figaro*). The fact that the Company could mount such weighty operas, albeit the latter, the weightiest of them all, in a co-production with Scottish Opera, is a cause for congratulation and an indication of its strength. But it is a sign of the present state of opera production that it is necessary to express relief that both directors, Peter Watson and the Romanian Sylviu Purcarete, are, apart from one serious lapse (of which more below), faithful to the intentions of the composer and to the libretto. To this extent, these productions (together with the recent, harrowing, *Jephtha*) atone for the Company's serious misjudgement in employing Calisto Beito to direct *Die Fledermaus*, (seen, or avoided, last year).

However, the two new productions share one common failing - the drabness and lack of imagination in the design of the sets. I suppose that to a large extent the design is dictated by the need for transportable sets to take on tour but there is no doubt an imaginative use of colour would have enhanced the visual experience of the performances. While one understands the problems faced by a touring company, the aesthetics of the sets and lighting should not be neglected. Opera should be a visual as well as a visceral experience.

Trovatore is one of the grandest of grand operas or was regarded as such until it was sent up by the Marx Brothers in the 1935 movie, *A Night at the Opera*, which exploited ruthlessly the thin line between the sublime and the ridiculous in this work! Productions of the opera need to be judged by which side of this line they fall. The plot is so implausible but the music so divine that it is only grand singers and a grand production that can have the power to reconcile music and action to bring it off. It is a pleasure to report that this production was marginally on the side of the sublime. However, there were major faults. The grey slabs of the sets, rearranged in different ways for the different scenes did not

adequately create the atmosphere of the different acts. This combined with what seemed almost complete absence of stage direction led to a general disappointment at the failure to do justice to the quality of the musical performance. Long pauses between the scenes led one to wonder whether, as in the movie, the tenor had been abducted; the precarious fall of a rather tattered drop curtain, between scenes, reminded one of the havoc caused to the scenery in the film. The lack of any serious attempt at sword-play in the duels and the casual way in which Leonora swigged poison from a hip flask added to this general sloppiness. The anvil chorus failed to have an impact.

It would have been better had they unashamedly adopted an old-fashioned, full-frontal, 'can belto', approach to the opera. Certainly, the quality of the four principals, the chorus and the backing of the WNO orchestra could have sustained such an approach. The orchestra, famed for its Verdi, found a worthy conductor in Alberto Hold-Garrida. Yuri Netchaev (di Luna), in particular, grabbed the attention from his first notes to his last. Elena Lasovskaya (Leonora) gave a moving portrayal of her role, particularly at the end; Patricia Bardon (Azucena) gave a superb performance, even though the part could do with a fuller and throatier voice. (It did not help that she was made up to look more like Manrico's daughter than his purported mother!)

In summary, this was a fine musical experience marred by totally inadequate staging. Even the dénouement line: '*Egli era tuo fratello!*' was thrown away. At least it didn't raise a laugh.

On the Saturday, a full house had managed to solve the problems of parking in Oxford for the 4.30 start of *Parsifal*. We awaited, with hushed expectation, the conductor, Vladimir Jurowski, already on his podium, to raise his baton for this acclaimed production. The first notes of the prelude, in which he adopted a slow, measured, tempo with long pauses combined with the gradual revelation of the scene of dormant knights drew one into the dark and troubled world of Monsalvat. Alfred Reiter, as Gurnemanz, in fine voice, commanded the stage and appeared in complete control of the slow motion choreography of the act. The scene change to the Hall of the Grail was especially cleverly managed with moving panels giving the impression of real progress from one place to another.

After the first act, one thought this was going to be a memorable and cherishable Wagnerian experience, completely respectful of the composer. Had one not been so overwhelmed by the power of the music and the drama and the quality of the singing, one might have paid more attention to little discordant details. The balsam, which Kundry is supposed to bring to alleviate the suffering of Amfortas, appeared as a handful of sand scraped up from the ground. Amfortas, himself, was dressed in what appeared to be an enveloping shroud, exposing only a naked right leg: somewhat excessive bandaging for a wound confined to his side. He rested on a hospital trolley as if having just come into an A&E department. For the most part the action was as prescribed but these were indications that the director had his own agenda

The second act opened with Donald Maxwell, as Klingsor, showing that as a Wagnerian singer he outclassed the singers of the first act, good though they were. This was a marvellously clear enunciation of his scene-setting monologue. But then things started to go off the rails. The bust of Kundry appeared about three metres above the stage, atop an enormous red skirt. The flower maidens were dressed in sterile white diaphanous robes. (I later learned from the programme that they were supposed to be dead! Maybe undead?) Their seduction technique consisted in winding their outer garments about Parsifal's neck, which clearly failed to turn him on - he appeared bemused rather than bewitched. After this, Kundry returned, above her skirt, out of which emerged the ubiquitous hospital trolley. On this, she attempted her seduction, after descending to earth. Maybe she would have had more success on a consulting room couch. Worse still, Klingsor then appeared in Kundry's form atop the red skirt for his attempt to hurl the spear at Parsifal. Wagner's clear stage direction for this crucial moment in the drama was ignored. The spear was not pointed at Parsifal, it was not cast or suspended in the air. The climax of the opera (this, not Kundry's kiss, as asserted in the programme) was ruined!

Fortunately, the third act returned to Wagner's concept. The knights had aged, except for Amfortas who appeared unchanged; he seemed not even to have had his dressing changed in the intervening years. (Such details matter.) But the ceremonial, now conducted by Parsifal, proceeded to its conclusion with due solemnity.

This production could have rivalled the 1986 production at English National Opera, conducted by Reginald Goodall, if the director had not tried to graft onto, or replace, Wagner's Teutonic eroticism with his own Transylvanian necrophilia. Wagner's imagery is complex enough without extraneous imposition of a reinterpretation of this nature.

Smoke and Gunshot

Tchaikowski: *Eugene Onegin*, Milton Keynes Theatre, 26 March 2004

For over thirty years now the Welsh National Opera has been a regular visitor to Oxford, with two or sometimes even three visits a year. Over this period we have seen many world class productions, unfortunately in far less than world class surroundings. The recent refurbishment and reversion in name of the New Theatre has done nothing to improve the comfort of the seats and the legroom (one awaits the first case of deep-vein thrombosis during a Wagner opera). The interval conditions in the circle foyer are even more suffocating since the installation of a bar. For the Company, the situation is as bad - having to share the alleyway beside the theatre with Debenhams' and Border's deliveries. I was not surprised to learn then that the touring scenery and sets have to be carefully tailored to fit the conditions. Oxford audiences should be full of gratitude that WNO continues to visit Oxford, as they plan to do. The contrast for them will be even greater when they move to their new home in the Wales Millennium Centre in 2005; productions there will not be so easily adapted for touring.

In these respects, the new Milton Keynes Theatre could not be a greater contrast to our beloved New Theatre, an impressive, modern, glass-fronted palace in open surroundings with, inside, a spacious foyer with open stairs leading symmetrically to the various levels. The auditorium is wide and open, every seat getting a full view of the stage. The seats were comfortable (though a sharp, narrow, metal armrest tended to cause friction with one's neighbour). Milton Keynes thus joins London, Birmingham, Stratford, Reading, Swindon as a venue for cultural events such as Oxford cannot provide. It is fortunate, then, that there exist clubs, organisations, companies who lay on coach trips to events which cannot be mounted in this would-be 'Capital of Culture'.

The Oxford Branch of the Friends of the Welsh National Opera has existed for many years. It is presently organised by a Green College, New College medical mafia and runs convivial coach trips to many events of interest to opera lovers. (There is sometimes the additional entertainment of overhearing indiscreet clinical chit-chat from the seats behind.) This occasion was, for me, a first visit to Milton Keynes Theatre to see, for the first time, the WNO under its new, young, Russian music director, Tugan Sokhiev. The production was of Tchaikowski's *Eugene Onegin*, starring Amanda Roocroft as an acclaimed Tatyana.

The title of this review arises from one of those warning signs that seem obligatory these days for reasons of safety or sensibility! (I recently booked for Rigoletto and was told by the box office 'I must warn you that this production contains nudity' - whether the warning was for aesthetic or for moral reasons, I am still trying to figure!). On this occasion it read 'Please be aware that smoke and gunshot are used in this performance'. Fortunately, there was barely any smoke and only one well-heralded gunshot.

Many of the Friends in our party were recalling the truly memorable production of the WNO from 1980 (an *annus mirabilis* for the company, when under the musical direction of Richard Armstrong the orchestra first reached its peak of perfection which it has maintained to this day under his successors). One could recall every detail of the staging of that production, starting with the real corn-field of the first act, the idea of the designer Michael Yeargan working with the director Andrei Serban, both new to opera at that time. Josephine Barstow sang Tatyana (her Letter Song I still hear in my mind as if yesterday) and Thomas Allen, Onegin. Thus, in anticipation, the present production had strong competition to face. However, from the opening notes it became clear that comparisons would be invidious (except in respect of the set design) and both productions would remain as jewels in the memory.

So how did that marvellous instrument, the orchestra of the WNO fare under its new maestro (a bold but brilliant choice)? For the occasion, it had certainly acquired a Russian timbre and richness of tone without losing its characteristic clarity of texture that enables conductors to bring out every subtlety and nuance of the score. As usual, it provided firm and inspiring backing to the singers.

The opening scene of the opera is low-key, representing the quiet life in the country about to be disrupted by the emotional storms produced by the arrival of Onegin. The scene is

an undefined white space, barely furnished at all, looking onto a green lawn and palisade. When Lensky and Onegin arrive, the surtitles mention their admiration of the flowers in the garden (there were none) and an invitation to sit down (there are only two rickety chairs on the stage, which were not used). Whose job is it to see that the surtitles are consistent with what we see? (Ultimately the director's, according to Graham Vick.) In fact, in general the surtitles in this production were obtrusive and much too detailed. In *Eugene Onegin*, actions speak louder than words (except, of course, for the Letter composition); surtitles are only needed as a guidance to subtleties of the dialogue. These (maybe to some, trivial) irritations (and another was the peculiar lighting of the Letter Scene) are only mentioned because they distracted from what, otherwise, was a near perfect operatic experience.

Amanda Roocroft made a wonderfully convincing Russian Tatyana, avoiding the trap for an English singer of appearing more Jane Austen than Alexander Pushkin. In the first act, she achieved a perfect balance between the naiveté and impetuosity of her role. She gave an immensely moving portrayal of her humiliation by Onegin made deeper by the kindly tone of its delivery. The part was sung on this occasion by Garry Magee. His was another extremely well judged performance. In a programme note the director, James Macdonald, states that, for the composer, Tatyana was clearly the centre of the opera. In this production, he has cleverly achieved a better balance between the protagonists so that the presence of Onegin hovers over the whole drama (even though the best music is given to others).

In the second act, the crowded stage is superbly choreographed (and not just the set dances). The action was dominated by the performance of Marius Brenchu as Lensky. Although his voice is perhaps not perfectly matched to this role, he more than made up for this by his musical and dramatic skills, portraying his jealousy at his apparent betrayal by his believed friend, fanned by the flighty behaviour of an excellent Olga (Ekaterina Semenchuk). Cameo roles by familiar friends, Suzanne Murphy (Madame Larina) and Robert Tear (Monsieur Triquet), as well as the rest of the cast, added to the excitement of this scene.

The third act was likewise beautifully sung, acted and choreographed. Indeed, Brindley Sherratt as Prince Gremin produced almost the best singing of the evening! The moment when Tatyana's new-found poise is temporarily shaken was particularly poignant. But again I must express some caveats about the production. The set was dominated by a large mirror, in front of which Onegin stood at the beginning of the act. I cannot have been alone in being reminded of Groucho Marx' mirror scene in *Duck Soup!* Again, I thought that the surtitle translation rather overdid Onegin's maudlin self-pity. Worst of all was the anachronism of the officers wearing their caps while dancing. I am sure this never happened, even in St Petersburg society!

In conclusion, a final word of praise for James Macdonald: having assembled such a fine, well-matched cast, he must take much credit for giving us such a thoughtful, subtle

interpretation of the drama, exploring in depth all the characters and their inter-relations, faithful to both Pushkin and Tchaikowsky.

Travesty

Verdi: *La Traviata*, New Theatre, Oxford, 6 July 2004.

I must be frank. The production of *La Traviata* by Welsh National Opera, set in modern times, was, despite much good singing, not up to the standard we have come to expect from this Company. It had the air of an offering of a provincial opera company, not of the national or international standard to which we are accustomed. This is all the more disappointing and saddening since the co-directors Patrice Caurier and Moshe Leiser were responsible for several recent outstanding successes: *Iphigénie en Tauride*, *Orphée et Eurydice*, *Fidelio*, *Carmen* and *Leonore*.

There is a view that *La Traviata* is so fixed in the conventions and social environment of its period that a modern day version is inconceivable. The view adopted by the directors is that there are sufficient contemporary resonances in today's world of fashion and glamour to point a message. No point was made. Apart from introducing some superficial artefacts of modern life - snorting cocaine, mobile telephone, a hospital drip and a television set, there was nothing that could not have been left in the nineteenth century. The curtain rose on an overcrowded stage, not helped by the fussy set design with screens and curtains taking up much valuable space. The champagne lacked fizz and the dancing was self-conscious. I have attended livelier parties here in Oxford! In both party scenes the minor characters were hard to distinguish. Only Annina (Sian Meinir) made any impression. In Act II scene 2, the gypsies were indistinguishable from the party goers and the camp behaviour of the 'matadors' was an embarrassment. The production was only redeemed by the singing and acting of the principals, Nuccia Focile as Violetta, Peter Wedd as Alfredo and Christopher Purves as Giorgio Germont. Focile performed beautifully throughout, even though (as one learnt afterwards) she was almost as indisposed as Violetta herself. The tall Alfredo resembled more a young Englishman on a first visit to Paris than a Frenchman from the provinces (a more radical reinterpretation for modern times perhaps?).

In the second act, the above mentioned mobile telephone made its appearance, into which Alfredo poured his heart as if to a close buddy (thus preventing Violetta from phoning through to say she was 'on the bus'). The key question is whether the success of Giorgio Germont's plea to Violetta is any more plausible to her and to the audience in the twenty-first century than in the nineteenth. It must be said that the persuasive singing of Christopher Purves helped one to suspend disbelief.

The last act had Violetta on a drip on a hospital bed, watching the street festivities on television rather than through the window. These gimmicks did nothing to enhance the essential drama of the closing scene, which, thanks to the performers, remained as

moving as ever. In the end Verdi asserted himself and the modern staging became an irrelevance.

Agony and Ecstasy

Gluck: *Iphigénie en Tauride*, 28 October, Richard Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, 30 October 2004, New Theatre, Oxford.

The Welsh National Opera was in town again during the third week of Term. On this occasion they brought two opera revivals and one new production. The new production was of Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*, the revivals were of *Turandot* (2000) and of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* (a 1992 production but seen in a 1997 revival). Of *Turandot*, I noted at the time 'awful production, brilliant music'; it has left no lasting impression save that of the rather silly backdrop with portraits of Turandot's previous victims. The Gluck opera I listed recently as one of twelve greatest operatic experiences of a lifetime. The former was avoided on this occasion; the latter, after much hesitation, fearing disillusionment, I decided to see again.

Iphigénie en Tauride is about two of the children of the archetypal dysfunctional family, Orestes and Iphigenia. The matricide Orestes arrives in Tauris (with a companion, Pylade), pursued by his Furies, where his long-lost sister is a priestess in the temple of Diana. Iphigenia was transported to Tauris by Diana in order to save her either from marriage to Achilles or from sacrifice by her father, Agamemnon, in exchange for a wind for Troy. (The record is not clear - see *Iphigénie en Glyndebourne*, Chapter 5). She is now charged with the sacrifice of strangers to the shores of Tauris (an uncomfortable resonance with today's terrorist hostage takers). The opera opens with one of the great operatic storms, comparable in dramatic impact to those in *Idomeneo*, *Les Troyens* and *Otello*. Iphigenia has premonitions about the impending arrivals. There follow nearly two hours of unremitting drama as the characters face up to a series of challenges and agonising choices in matters of life and death, until at the last moment Diana relents (again!) and brother and sister are reunited. They are sent back to Greece to join their sister Electra, who egged Orestes on to murder his mother, Clytemnestra, for murdering their father Agamemnon in the mistaken belief (in some versions) that he had indeed sacrificed Iphigenia.

There was no disillusionment! I came away with my view reinforced that this is a truly great opera, which had received a worthy interpretation in all departments. But my perceptions of the two performances were different. My main recollection of the 1997 production was the heart-stopping performance of Diana Montague in the title role, which had a 'tingle factor' rarely experienced. On this occasion Ann Murray sang the part with great power and understated drama but not quite with the same charisma. Her voice had a slightly shrill edge to it, appropriate in some passages but not throughout. The wonderfully mellifluous singing of the chorus of priestesses pointed a contrast. The men, Andrew Schroeder (Oreste) and Paul Nilon (Pylade) were terrific, both vocally and

dramatically. But it was Gluck's music and its interpretation by Michael Hofstetter that grabbed the attention on this occasion. The sheer intensity and concentration of the music, with its rich and original orchestration was overpowering. A remarkable passage with flute and oboe in unison soon after the storm scene and the percussive accompaniment of the Scythians were particularly noticed. (No wonder Berlioz was a fanatic for Gluck!)

The production, by Caurier and Leiser, has also stood the test of time. For once the bare scenery, with moving grey flats, suggesting different spaces did not seem inappropriate (even if not in period). The surtitles (by Simon Rees, for once credited) were unobtrusive and useful. However, they were barely necessary for anyone with French - the words came over with great clarity, as much to Gluck's credit as to the singers one suspects!

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In the cultural revolution brought about by the introduction of the BBC's Third Programme at the end of World War II, there were several broadcasts which have stayed in the mind ever since. Apart from the first opportunity to hear Wagner's Ring cycle, there was a concert in which Yehudi Menuhin, on his first postwar visit to Europe, played the Beethoven and the, then newly-composed, Bartok violin concertos, there was Bernard Shaw's blockbuster talk-fest, *Man and Superman*, and there was Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. The last incorporated in its second half, Richard Strauss' opera, *Ariadne auf Naxos*. This, of course, was the original form in which the opera was performed, as an entertainment laid on by the would-be *gentilhomme* who decreed at the last moment that its two components, the eponymous *opera seria* and a harlequinade, had to be performed simultaneously in order to make time for a firework display. If this is regarded as the 'upstairs' version, in which the first part involves Molière's *gentilhomme* and his companions, today we normally see the opera in a 'downstairs' version in which Molière is replaced by a Prologue (originally proposed by von Hofmannsthal) in which the backstage antics of the two performing companies are presented. (It would be interesting to know if Strauss was aware of the opera buffa of 1769, entitled *Opera Seria*, by Leopold Gassmann, also concerned with the production and abortive premiere of an *opera seria*. This is a marvellous send-up, revived in Paris in 2003, not least for three competing sopranos, each with an attendant pushy mother!)

The first time I saw *Ariadne auf Naxos* on the stage was a Welsh National Opera production in Bristol in 1989, having endured a ride in a leaking Friends' coach in pouring rain leaving from the almost submerged Oxford Park and Ride, nearly arriving late because the driver could not find the theatre! The impression of this production was, that, light-hearted and funny as the opera is, it nevertheless makes serious points: the complete mutual incomprehension of introverts and extroverts, characterised by Ariadne (dumped by Theseus) and Zerbinetta (happily wooed by four clowns), the contrast in style of the two musical forms, the message that he who pays the piper calls the tune. In this case the consequent implication is that the discipline of imposed external constraints can improve a work of art - how much more entertaining is the resulting combined opera than would

be *Ariadne* followed by the harlequinade. A production in Hamburg seen in 1994, was lavishly staged and beautifully sung but played completely without humour! Most recently, in 1997, at the London Coliseum conducted by Richard Hickox, it had a delightfully contrasted pair, Christine Brewer as Ariadne and Erie Mills as Zerbinetta, illustrating the above point to perfection.

The Prologue of WNO's production was almost without fault, the staging of the comings and goings managed to perfection. It was good to see that veteran stalwart trouper, Richard van Allen, dominate the proceedings as the major-domo; Imelda Drumm (substituting for Alice Coote) played a cool composer and Katarzyna Dondalska, a slightly subdued Zerbinetta. Janice Watson established herself as the prima donna taking on the role of Ariadne. However, I seem to have been the only person to find the staging of the Opera perverse and a real distraction from the marvellous musical performance, which it should be there to support. The evening's entertainment only makes sense if the pretence of a production in the private theatre of 'the richest man in Vienna' is maintained. The apologia by the designer, Dale Ferguson, in the programme is muddle-headed and self-serving. The tattiness of the opening scene, with a single chair the only prop for an *opera seria* was not consistent with the elaborate machinery and the bizarre backdrop of the concluding scenes. The staging spoilt for me full enjoyment of the wonderful singing and playing under Carlo Rizzi (originally billed as guest conductor but now restored to the Company as temporary Music Director). Zerbinetta sang all her notes true, the topmost being greeted by bravos from a WNO claque seated in row O of the stalls (the best seats in the House for opera). Her suitors behaved admirably in their efforts to cheer up Ariadne. In the Opera, Watson gave a most moving performance throughout, climaxing in the duet with a perfectly matched Bacchus (Peter Hoare) at the end. Legend records that they lived happily ever after.

But the evening should have ended with the fireworks!

Uncanny

Berg: *Wozzeck*, Milton Keynes Theatre, 19 March 2005.

One evening in March, a subdued coach party of Oxford Friends of Welsh National Opera returned home from Milton Keynes, after an unforgettable harrowing ninety minutes spent in the Theatre, experiencing WNO's new production of Alban Berg's opera, *Wozzeck*.

The Company's previous production of the opera, seen in Oxford in 1986, is remembered as a dramatic interpretation of an opera of its period. This was a literal interpretation of the libretto by Liviu Ciulei, with a strong cast of Joll in the title role, Harrhy as Marie, his girl, and Ellsworth as the Drum-Major, conducted by Armstrong. This had not prepared one for the dramatic impact of the present production under the musical direction of Vladimir Jurowski, which revealed the opera as one of the great dramatic masterworks of

the twentieth century. Following last year's *Parsifal*, the performance demonstrated the tremendous rapport between the orchestra and this conductor, which should previously have been consummated by his appointment as Music Director when Glyndebourne carried him off.

The story is based on a play by Büchner of 1836, itself based on real life. It tells of a simple-minded soldier, Wozzeck, whose life of humiliation and drudgery is only lightened by his feelings for Marie and their son. He supports them by earning extra pennies as batman to his captain and as a guinea pig for dietary experiments of a demented doctor. When Marie is seduced by a drum major, Wozzeck flips completely, kills Marie and is himself drowned. It is a very dark plot but uncomfortably topical with present day news reports of bullying and verbal and psychological abuse in the armed forces, schools and the workplace.

The score of the opera comprises fifteen complex symphonic movements, a sophisticated commentary on the simple tragic drama acted out on stage. Jurowski interprets Berg's score with profound understanding and drives the orchestra to unprecedented achievement - the crashing chords at the final climax are almost unbearable. At the same time, he combines this with sensitive accompaniment of some fine singing. Above all, praise is due to Christopher Purves' interpretation of the title role, a perfectly judged and moving depiction of Wozzeck's degeneration. Peter Hoare (the Captain), Gun-Britt Barkman (Marie), Peter Svensson (the Drum-Major), Clive Bailey (the Doctor) and the rest of the cast all contribute to an exceptionally well-acted interpretation of the drama. For this, the Director, Richard Jones, must take much credit. His control of the chorus in a stylised *danse macabre* was particularly effective.

However, the question must be asked: is the production successful because of or in spite of the staging? Richard Jones is well known for his imaginative retakes on operas, which are often on the borderline of acceptability. For WNO, *The Queen of Spades* was brilliant but *Hansel and Gretel* was controversial (I disliked it). On this occasion, the action was taken out of the army and placed in a baked bean cannery, as one was forewarned. I had imagined this was suggested because the Doctor has Wozzeck on a diet of beans. But according to a programme note, the reason is ideological, calling attention to an analogy of corporate psychopathic behaviour to that of individuals. Fortunately, the overwhelming development of the music drama was too powerful for one to be distracted by such considerations at the time. The main problem with such translations is that the words don't fit what is happening on the stage. It would be tedious to list all the minor irritations. Most serious is the opening of the opera. Wozzeck is shaving the Captain using an *electric* razor (for goodness' sake). The point of this scene is to show that though dim, Wozzeck is not considered insane - otherwise the Captain would not allow him near a razor! One has to remember that Wozzeck's relationship with Marie has lasted long enough to bring up their son. It is only in the second scene that he begins to hallucinate and this is in the open air, cutting wood, not in front of a *Modern Times* type production line. The age of the child presents another problem. He has to be young enough not to understand that his mother is dead or the final scene makes no sense. *Ring-a- ring-a-*

roses is for five-year olds. In this production the kids appeared twice that age. The television set in the home could be regarded, I suppose, as a necessary modern touch. But was this the set retrieved from Violetta's apartment after her death at the end of WNO's *Traviata*? The Company should avoid such clichés!

These criticisms are, in the main, retrospective. At the time, the staging, with all its more obvious faults, could be accepted on its own terms. It gave a well-judged development of the drama from the soul-destroying boredom of Wozzeck's life at the beginning, steadily building up the tension through Marie's infidelity to the final climax of the murder and his death, smothered in a skip full of empty cans. In the end the staging did not detract from the shattering effect of the production as a whole.

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It was very bold of Welsh National Opera to choose *Wozzeck* as the first new production at the Millennium Centre. Its enormous critical success attracted large audiences, if not the sell-out more popular choices of opera might have ensured. But with this world-class performance, WNO has got off to a brilliant start in its new home. It has set itself a very high standard to maintain.

Dressing up

Verdi: *Don Carlos*, New Theatre Oxford, 29 October 2005.

The new production of the five-hour, extended five-act version of Verdi's opera *Don Carlos* was performed in Oxford on Saturday, 29 October. It was a performance which will remain long in the memory. It will be remembered principally for the inspired playing of the orchestra responding, as usual, to the musical interpretation of the conductor Carlo Rizzi, newly restored as the Company's Musical Director. It was an orchestral performance deserving of the world's greatest singers. The actual cast rose to the occasion and all gave outstanding performances.

That is the good news.

At a post-performance supper party, I was reminded by one of our guests that at one stage I had expressed doubt as to whether to book seats for this production. For one thing, I did not want to lose the images, still vivid, of the 1973 WNO production directed by Michael Geliot and conducted (in Oxford) by Richard Armstrong. This for me was a revelatory turning point in my appreciation of opera. But the main reason for doubt was the interview, by Simon Rees, with the director John Caird, published in *Opera Live*, WNO's promotional magazine. In this, Caird lays stress on historical parallels with the themes of the opera, hinting that these are to be spelt out in his production. I read this with a sense of *déjà vu*, being reminded of similar Rees interviews with the apologia of the directors of *Rigoletto*, set in the Oval Office, and *La Traviata* transferred to the twentieth century. I feared the worst.

On this occasion the director chose to point to this universality by dressing the performers in a mixture of clothing from all periods from fascist uniforms and mafia greatcoats of today to cowled monks of the period of the Inquisition with ladies' fashions in between. (At least we were spared togas and Greek tunics.) In the ten years that this production was in preparation (so we are told), did nobody stop to ask whether this was really a good idea? There are two questions every director should ask himself, as does every reviewer: Does this enhance or detract from the production as an interpretation of the composer's and librettist's vision? Does the production succeed with the help of, or in spite of this? In the present context, emphatically the costumes 'detract'; the success is 'in spite of' the costumes. The opera is firmly set in the religious, political and social climate of the sixteenth century; the audience should be left to draw its own parallels and not be patronised in this way. In the *auto-da-fé* scene, the anachronisms were so particularly appalling that I was forced to close my eyes and re-visualise the 1973 production, which was a brilliantly staged spectacle.

Don Carlos is the grandest of grand operas. It is a virtue of this production that this was demonstrated in the narrower sense of *grand-opéra* as mid-nineteenth century romantic French opera. The scenes were designed as a series of tableaux as background for the action. Based on the play by Schiller, itself based on historical characters, though not on historical events, the opera relates the story of the ill-fated Don Carlos, the son of Phillippe II of Spain, whose love for Elizabeth de Valois is frustrated by her marriage to the King. The greatness of this opera as drama stems from the complexity with which each of the characters are drawn and revealed through their music: Elizabeth, loyal to her husband, the King, trying to assert his authority in the face of the power of the Church personified by the Grand Inquisitor. Of almost equal importance are the Princesse Eboli, mistress of the King but in love with Carlos, taking jealous vengeance on the Queen when she discovers that Carlos loves the Queen, not her, and the Marquis of Posa, whose loyalties are divided in his attempt to achieve alleviation of the suffering of the people of Flanders. The drama evolves inexorably with lighter moments in the early Acts, becoming darker and darker, leading up to the confrontation of King and Inquisitor and the execution of Carlos.

There was some glorious singing from, for the most part, well-matched voices. This is important in *Don Carlos* since the plot unfolds mainly in a series of duets between the principals. The Elizabeth of Sofia Mitropoulos sang sweetly, though a little lacking in power, but the vocal sensation of the evening was the Eboli of Guang Yang, the Chinese mezzo, remembered as the surprise winner of the 1997 Cardiff Singer of the World. Her performance vindicated the choice of the judges. Although still some way from maturity both vocally and dramatically, her singing wowed the audience, not only in her 'excerpt' aria, *O don fatal*, but also in her duets, particularly when disguised as the Queen, with Don Carlos. (Yes - it is one of those operas where the plot hinges on the inability of the tenor to distinguish between the soprano and the mezzo.) Scott Hendriks, as Posa, made a great impression. Paul Charles Clarke (Carlos) was suitably anguished throughout; Andrea Silvestrelli (Phillippe) sang powerfully, if somewhat stolidly, and, despite his ridiculous

costume, dominated the stage, as he should except in the presence of the Inquisitor. This was a problem: the Inquisitor, played by Daniel Sumegi failed both vocally and in stage presence to exert his authority.

Some of the stage sets were good, others bad. Fontainebleau forest was Hieronymus Bosch rather than Brueghel, as the music demands. Throughout there was a completely superfluous proliferation of crosses of all shapes, sizes and colours - another symptom of the failure to anchor the production firmly in the sixteenth century.

Do not be misled. This was a major operatic triumph 'in spite of' the director's obsession with costume. It is yet one more of too many of WNO's great performances which only succeed 'in spite of': a television set in Violetta's sickroom, the Oval Office, 'undead' Flower Maidens or the Nurse in *Poppea* dressed in Red Cross uniform.

No Fear of Flying

Wagner: *Der Fliegende Holländer*, Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff, 22 February 2006.

Der Fliegende Holländer, or *The Dutchman*, as it is familiarly known to anglophone opera lovers, represents a turning point in Wagner's musical output and is therefore a work of considerable historical importance. Composed in 1843, between *Rienzi* (1842) and *Tannhäuser* (1845), it is the start of the transition from the Grand Opéra style of the former, a succession of musical numbers linking an evolving story, to Music Drama in which the music acts as a wrapper for the development of the plot, referring back to what has gone before and forward to what is to come. Both *Rienzi* and *The Dutchman* received their premiers in Dresden. As Ernest Newman remarks of the latter that, after *Rienzi*: *the subject seemed a gloomy one to the good Dresdeners, nor did they realise that what they were expected to be interested in was not a stage spectacle but a problem in psychology*.

On this occasion the opportunity was offered by the Oxford Friends of Welsh National Opera to travel by coach for a first visit to the magnificent Donald Gordon Theatre at the Wales Millennium Centre to see the new production of *The Dutchman*, directed by David Pountney and conducted by Carlo Rizzi with Bryn Terfel in the title role. Other parts included Gidon Saks as the sea captain, Daland, Annalena Persson as his daughter, Senta, and Ian Storey as her childhood sweetheart, Erik. Peter Wedd, remembered as Alfredo from WNO's 2004 *Traviata* played the somnolent Steersman. The video artists were Jane and Louise Wilson.

It has to be said at once. The WNO made a serious misjudgement in engaging Pountney to direct this opera. I have said before that, in judging operatic productions, one has to ask: does it succeed with the help of or in spite of the direction? On this occasion it required the exceptionally strong musical and vocal performance to overcome the perversity of the staging. The set consisted of an overhead bridge and gantry, beneath which were a series of moving screens onto which various video images were projected. These ranged from

blown-up close ups of the faces of the singers, through various background scenes (some of which resembled pages from an Ikea catalogue), to images of a derelict Soviet space centre (some with clear phallic intent).

The opera is *not* rocket science (as one says). It is a simple romantic tale of a young women haunted by the legend of the Flying Dutchman condemned to sail the seas unless he can find, on an occasional landfall, a loving woman faithful unto death in order to redeem his curse. When confronted with the reality, Senta, quite literally, leaps at the opportunity, by casting herself off a rock. As she falls to her death in the sea, the Dutchman's ship founders with all aboard. (Except that on this occasion she vaguely descended a spiral staircase.) Thus Senta is the first in Wagner's sequence of redemptively-challenged heroines. In Pountney's apologia printed in the programme, he spins a metaphysical web of interpretation entirely of his own imagination, paying little attention to Wagner's inspiration as expressed through the music and represented in the text. It is just not true that there is nothing else similar before Strauss' *Salome*. There are no grounds for describing Senta as a spoilt obsessive teenager. Listen to her music, read her words. Wagner himself wrote in *A Communication to My Friends* in 1851 (and I quote from Newman again): *It was the longing of the Flying Dutchman for the redeeming woman ... the quintessence of womankind, and yet still the longed-for, the undreamed of, the infinitely womanly Woman, let me say it in one word, the Woman of the Future.* (Poor Richard, little could he have guessed what was to come! And yet, as gossip columns and scandal sheets relate, the world is not entirely free of young women with redemptive ambitions.) This is romanticism not Freud.

The first of the three Acts (here given without intervals – as Wagner first envisaged the opera, giving musical and dramatic continuity) is devoted to establishing the characters of Daland and the Dutchman and their different attitudes to the sea. Daland expresses his relief at escape from danger but frustration in being forced to seek haven so close to home; the latter faces up to the probable futility of the latest stage in his endless search. They meet and almost immediately enter into a bargain for Senta's hand in exchange for a treasure chest. Saks brought a most impressive voice to the part of Daland which grabbed the attention from the start and provided a perfect match to Terfel's Dutchman who was in top form in his portrayal of the haunted captain. (For some reason the bargaining required a change of scene to a domestic setting away from the space centre, while singing of their proximity to the sea.) The second scene was more conventional, except that the girls spinning were dressed in Soviet-style uniforms while their threads provided a maypole. Persson made a charming, headstrong Senta (though no obsessive teenager). Many found a slightly harsh edge to her voice at low power (a characteristic, I am told, of would-be Birgit Nilssons) but at full power she produced a tremendously glorious sound. Yet her duet with Erik was sung with great delicacy by both singers. Storey gave a sensitive portrayal of the bewildered and jealous swain. The last Act was marred by a half-hearted orgy scene, supposed to represent the fond farewells of the girls to their embarking lovers.

The music of *The Dutchman* is a mixture of some very Italianate writing with some exciting Wagnerian sound, particularly in the outer Acts. As we expect, Rizzi gives tremendous bounce to the more Verdian passages, such as the duet between Senta and Erik, but the Germanic music lacked a little of the punch and precision which Jurowski got from this orchestra in *Parsifal* and in *Wozzeck*. As usual, the choruses, both men and women, excelled.

I conclude this review by addressing a few words to the management of WNO and to the director. To the management I say, in relation to the director, ‘he who pays the piper calls the tune’. In their turn management is, in part, accountable to their audience. Of course, in opera, the director must have great artistic freedom but only within the framework of producing a unifying fusion of the words and the music on the one hand with the staging and the action on the other. The trouble with this production was that it was as if we were experiencing two completely different works. There may be no objection to a version of the legend of the Flying Dutchman that takes place on a disused space-centre, where Senta is a close relative of Salome, where Norwegian maidens are replaced by members of a workers’ cooperative who suffer communal violation on the crew’s departure but *please don’t involve Wagner*. If nothing else, in the age of surtitles you can’t get away with it (provided, of course, they are not also tampered with). With its magnificent new auditorium, WNO has more seats to fill. It must be careful not to alienate its existing loyal following.

History repeating?

Tchaikowski: *Mazepa*, New Theatre, Oxford, 1 July, 2006

Mazepa is the second and least performed of Tchaikowski’s three Pushkin-based operas. In this sensational new production for Welsh National Opera, directed by Moshe Leiser and Patrice Caurier, everything comes together to provide a night at the opera long to be savoured. Even the decision to bring the action forward to the present day, from the time of the battle of Poltava in 1709 adds relevance with present day struggles of the Ukraine to assert its independence from the competing threats and blandishments of Russia (of Peter the Great in the original) and of Europe (of Charles XII of Sweden)

Mazepa is Grand Opera with a Russian flavour, depicting the private relationships of its protagonists against the background of the historical events in which they are caught up. After an extended overture, the three acts display three scenes from Pushkin’s narrative poem *Poltava*. In the first, Mariya, daughter of Ukrainian leader, Kochubei, chooses to follow the much older Cossack commander Mazepa, abandoning her family and her admirer Andrei. In revenge her father denounces Mazepa’s political ambitions to Russia but is not believed. In Act II, Mazepa has imprisoned and tortured Kochubei, which Mariya only discovers at her father’s execution. Act III depicts the aftermath of the battle of Poltava. Mazepa, now a fugitive, encounters Andrei and shoots him among the ruins of

the family home. A deranged Mariya appears and Andrei dies in her arms in a deeply poignant finale.

The structure of the opera and the score are fascinating and intriguing. Much of it is written in a percussive style that almost foreshadows Shostakovich, but occasionally breaking into lyrical passages reminiscent of *Eugene Onegin* and the bombastic march depicting the battle of Poltava. At the same time, can one not detect some flavour of *verismo* opera in the treatment of the characters and the plot development? The staging enhanced this impression, with fairly basic sets and the execution scene being filmed and viewed on television by the chorus. The surtitles were excellent, with only a few anomalous references to Peter the Great, Charles XII and the Swedes.

The singing was superb throughout (down to Philip Lloyd Holtam as a drunken Cossack), the Russian sounded authentic though only the ladies were Russian. Robert Hayward, recently WNO's alternative Dutchman, enhanced his reputation as did Gidon Saks (Daland in the same production) in the role of Kochubei. Tatiana Monogarova gave a touching portrayal of Mariya. But the outstanding performances, both with a 'tingle-factor' rarely met outside the great opera houses, came from the tenor Hugh Smith as Andrei and Marianna Tarasova as Mariya's mother. Smith had a solidity of tone throughout his range, rare in tenors today – an appropriate winner of the Pavarotti Voice Competition, 1995. The conductor was Alexander Polianichko (who has previously conducted *Hansel and Gretel* for WNO). The orchestra, in top form, responded to his beat as if Russian born. He confirmed to me after the performance that the WNO orchestra was the most responsive he had encountered. He also commended the Oxford audience as being the only one that had awaited complete silence at the end before applauding.

The Return of Monteverdi

Monteverdi: *The Return of Ulysses*, New Theatre, Oxford, 17 October 2006

Everybody enjoyed this production – up to a point. As always with Monteverdi, the power of the music drama itself is almost overwhelming. His authority stamps every production. The question to be addressed is the extent to which the director, in this case David Alden, and the performers enhance or detract from enjoyment of this mastery.

Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria, to give the full title, as one should for an Italian language production, is the lesser of Monteverdi's two final great masterpieces. The other, *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, received the Alden treatment in a WNO production in 1998 so one feared the worst. This latter great tragicomedy heads my chronological list of the ten greatest operas ever. In Alden's production it was played as straight comedy, completely insensitive to the heartbreak of Ottavia and of Ottone, the tragedy of Seneca and the eroticism of the relations between Poppea and Nerone, with silly visual puns like dressing the nurse, Arnalta, in Red Cross uniform.

Ulysses was not as bad as this but it provides the clue to what was unsatisfactory about the production. *Poppea* is not without humour. In fact, the light relief provided by the three goddesses and some minor characters enhances the drama of the main protagonists. *Il ritorno d'Ulisse* relates the denouement of the great Epic: Penelope's imminent capitulation to the suitors, Ulisse's arrival in Ithaca, meeting his son Telemachus to appear in disguise before revealing who he is after slaying the suitors with his great bow and convincing Penelope of his identity. (I never understood why he forgot to take his bow with him to Troy.) The drama of this opera is lightened by the humour of the prologue in which Human Frailty is tormented by Time, Fortune and Love, by minor characters and appearances of the goddess Minerva.

In Alden's production the prologue is played out as a piece of surrealist buffoonery but then at the start of Part One, Monteverdi asserts himself with a deeply poignant scene where Penelope, movingly sung by Sara Fulgoni, reflects on her lot. The effect of this scene is ruined by a following piece of gratuitous vulgarity of the sort which seems to be *de rigueur* with certain directors, in which Penelope's maid Melanto (Sara Tynan) sheds her knickers while her boyfriend Eurimacho (Andrew Tortise), on behalf of the suitors, enlists her help to get Penelope to choose between them. Despite the handicap of the direction these two singers acquit themselves well; given the chance, Tynan makes a charming Melanto. But this typifies the production – a failure to draw the line in the right place between the presentation of the drama and the sardonic comment upon it.

There is much that is good. The following scenes of Ulisse's (Paul Nylon) landing in Ithaca and his first encounters build the tension inexorably before the climax in Part Two. The Telemaco of Ed Lyon was particularly notable, though his frequent changes of costume posed distracting questions which should not be the business of the director, whose role is to answer questions posed by the opera, not to ask his own. The miscellaneous gods and goddesses are kept to the sidelines and one can almost forgive the wheelchair in which Ulysses returns home disguised.

There was a consensus that Part Two was 'better'. This was partly for the usual reason that the director had run out of original ideas and let the opera speak for itself. However, there was some telling staging. The scenes with the three suitors, well sung by Clive Bayley, Iestyn Davies and Andrew Mackenzie-Wicks, attempting to string the bow were dramatic, although there remained some ambivalence as to whether they were figures of menace or of fun. The handling of the grotesque glutton Iro (Neil Jenkins) one could accept in the spirit of the production. The ominous shadow of a great bird hovering over the final scenes was effective but the bow, bursting into flame (rather than firing arrows), a spectacular gimmick worthy of an Ellen Kent production, did not work.

Musically the production was terrific. The sixteen piece string orchestra drawn from the ranks of the WNO orchestra and the six member continuo group, directed from the harpsichord by Rinaldo Alessandrini played Monteverdi's music as well as any 'period' orchestra – a far cry from their usual Wagner and Verdi. A flawed production but

acceptable - just. If only the director had had a clear, correct balance between the telling of the story and the comedic comment upon it.

Chapter 4 – Home and Abroad

At any time these days the airways over Europe and further afield are filled with group travellers indulging their own particular passions. Whether it is hedonists seeking bacchanalia in the sun, sports fanatics following a favourite team or culture junkies in search of new thrills in music, art, architecture or archaeology, all take advantage of package tours which take the hassle out of planning and getting around. Although this reduces the freedom of action of the independent-minded traveller, there are compensations. When one reaches the stage in life when sight-seeing requires two pairs of spectacles - one to read the guide book, the other to study the monuments - then is the time to consider abandoning individual exploratory travel and enrolling on an organised tour with the services of a guide. In our case, the passion is opera and it has led us to many opera houses at home and abroad. The following reports cover a few of these excursions: Budapest, Vienna, Dresden, Riga, London, Paris.

A Tale of Two Cities

Janáček:*Jenufa*, Verdi: *Falstaff*, Operaház, Budapest, 1,3 April 2004; Lehár: *Die Lustige Witwe*, Wiener Volksoper, 7 May; Verdi: *Falstaff*, Wiener Staatsoper, 8 May 2004.

One's first impression of Budapest, on arrival, is one of cleanliness. From the shiny clean airport, with newly designed passport controls, now labelled 'EU', one receives a warm and friendly welcome. What a contrast to the squalid shopping mall, known as the Terminal 1 Departure Lounge at Heathrow! The impression is a lasting one; streets, public buildings, public transport and shops are the same. We were informed, with refreshing frankness, of the reciprocal Hungarian first impression of the state of cleanliness of London! The drive into the city and subsequent tour of the principal monuments (all beautifully presented) gave the flavour of both the broad boulevards of Pest and of the Castle District and Gellert Hill in Buda. The former is dominated by buildings of the nineteenth century European style which extends northward to the Nordic cities, with the occasional Art Deco façade, Soviet-style apartment blocks and low-rise 'temporary' structures. A brilliant resumé of Hungary's history, delivered by our local guide around the statues in Heroes' Square, revealed the proud claim that Hungary stopped burning witches in the twelfth century, long before the rest of Europe.

The Opera House, dating from 1884 is a miniature version of the Palais Garnier in Paris, with red-carpeted, elegantly curved marble staircases leading to the various levels of the auditorium and to the salons (where our solicitous guide helped us order interval refreshments). It has a distinguished history, with both Gustav Mahler and Otto Klemperer as Music Directors. The auditorium, seating 1261 (little more than half

Covent Garden) is magnificent with a very high proscenium and large stage. The seats are wide but unpadded!

Two operas were seen in Budapest, *Jenufa*, and *Falstaff*, both forming part of the Budapest Spring Festival. In our innocence, an attraction was the possibility to see an Eastern European opera in an Eastern European production. With more European sensitivity we would have realised that for the Hungarians, a Czech opera is as foreign as it is to us! Indeed, we learnt there had been some local controversy about its inclusion in the Festival! Nevertheless, it had been given a genuine Czech production, sung in Czech with Hungarian surtitles. (Tactful enquiry established that the peasant costumes were, indeed, also genuine!)

The production was reassuringly familiar, the musical standard high. Janáček's tight coupling of the music to the action gives producers little room for manoeuvre! (I have yet to encounter a bad production of Janáček - maybe for this reason!) The opening scene had two mill wheels and a large chorus, with many children. The singing was good, with a particularly sensitive performance by Wendler Attila as Laca. (I adopt the Hungarian convention of giving the patronymic first). Steva (Guljás Dénes), to my mind, lacked the appropriate degree of boorishness. The female roles were all well sung but the star was the Kostelníčka (Sekrestyésnéné) of Temesi Mária, who dramatised the part with appropriate anguish. Alas, one must report a strange aberration at the end! During the wedding preparations, someone piles blocks of ice on the stage. The last of these appears to contain a miniature angel bearing a candle, I suppose symbolising the dead baby!

The *Falstaff* was an impressive staging with a rotating set facilitating the scene changes. Indeed the production recalled the quasi-definitive staging of Peter Stein for Welsh National Opera in 1988, though it lacked the tight balletic movement of that memorable production. The ensemble singing and the action were exemplary. Unfortunately the Falstaff of Sólyom Nagy Sándor was the weak link; he did not have the voice nor the personality to dominate the action. This was particularly noticeable in the fugue finale, which, as a result, totally lacked balance.

The trip to Vienna was with a party of Friends of Welsh National Opera groupies off to hear our President, Bryn Terfel, sing Falstaff. The city has changed since the last visit, over twenty years ago; the increase in motor traffic gives it less of a complacent air of living in the past. Monuments, such as Schönbrunn and the Hofburg have been 'heritaged' and gift-shopped, with an inordinate emphasis on the life and times of the Empress Elizabeth. Several rooms in the Hofburg have recently been 'Sissified'. Carol Reed and 'The Third Man' are still extensively referenced. (But, to be fair, so is Beethoven, at Heiligenstadt, and by Klimt in the Secession building.) All this was at the expense of giving a real feel for the broader impact of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Nevertheless the great collections of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, the Albertina and the Belvedere remain unchanged, as awe-inspiring as ever.

One evening was spent at the Volksoper for *Die Lustige Witwe*. This was totally delightful, in spite of the lack of surtitles (not even for the mobile telephone warning). The plot is so ephemeral as not to matter! Seen from the back row of the upper circle, it appeared very much as a Busby Berkeley musical. The playing and singing were full of joy, the last act being 'padded out' by a splendid can-can imported from another operetta. (The line between musical and operetta does not exist at the Volksoper - last time I was there a spectacular production of *Zigeunerbaron*, employing half the Viennese youth of military age, together with their horses, was followed the next day by *Küss mich Kätschen*.)

The production of *Falstaff* was one of those which *almost* blows aside one's critical faculties. Both musically and in dramatic judgement, it was a tour de force, in a different league to that in Budapest. Although having both an Italian director (Fabio Luisi) and Italian designer (Marco Arturo Marelli), the production had almost a Wagnerian character. (One should tread carefully here - better say Germanic!)

Admittedly, the opening gave cause for concern: the curtain rose on a bare wooden platform but this rose up forming the roof of the Garter Inn, which was revealed as a sort of subterranean squat piled with oil drums. Falstaff reclined on a tattered sofa, receiving geisha-like attention from an androgynous page. Fortunately, Verdi soon took control as the drama unfolded, led by Terfel in magnificent appearance and voice. The roof descended again to form the stage for the second scene. In this, there was an unusual balance between the four ladies. Alice (Krassimira Stoyanova) and Meg (Nadia Krasteva) looked elegant and sang enchantingly but the personality and presence came from Bori Keszei as Nannetta and Jane Henschel as Mistress Quickly. The former, with Cosmin Ifrim as Fenton, formed an attractive pair of young lovers, the altered balance pointing a striking contrast to the worldly-wise wives and the lecherous Falstaff. In their dialogues with Falstaff, Mistress Quickly and particularly Carlos Alvarez as Fontana/Ford were perfect foils both vocally and dramatically.

The performance was given with just one interval, after Act II, which worked very well, since most of Act III was played as pure fantasy. The tormenting of Falstaff was set as an expressionist nightmare with a wide semi-circle of moonlit white-clad ghouls entangling him in a phosphorescent white rope. The tension broke, with perfect musical timing, with the unveiling of the united young lovers and a return to reality for the final fugue, this time perfectly balanced. The performance ended with a well-deserved extended ovation, which just fell short of drawing everyone to their feet (a nice judgement).

Incidentally, I asked our Viennese guide when the Austrians stopped burning witches. 'Oh, we never had witches in Austria' was her reply - a pre-echo of a more recent state of denial, perhaps?

Sacred and Profane

Dresden, 26 February to 3 March, 2005; Offenbach: *Die Schöne Helena*, Staatsoperette, 27 February, Richard Strauss: *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*, Staatsoper, 1 March.

When planning a family celebration in Dresden, it was at first overlooked that this would follow two weeks after the marking of the sixtieth anniversary of the firebombing that devastated the centre of the city in the air raids of 13th and 14th February 1945. This revival of memories added piquancy to the visit whose primary aim had been to attend the opera to see the strange, haunting, imaginative Richard Strauss, Hugo von Hofmannsthal masterpiece *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*. Memories of the bombing are, at this time, focussed on the restoration of the Frauenkirche, due to be completed in October. The two buildings, the Frauenkirche and the Staatsoper, stand at opposite ends of the cultural centre of the Old City as symbols of the resilience of aspects of the human spirit - the sacred and the profane. It is also a comment on the human condition that the rebuilding of the Opera House was started in 1975 and completed in 1985 (so that it was part of a twenty year celebratory season of Strauss operas which we attended). The restoration of the Frauenkirche was not initiated until 1991, after the fall of communism.

Of the Frauenkirche, only the undercroft is yet open to the public for services, concerts and other events. We attended a lecture and video of the history of the building, with a particularly dignified and moving account of the events of 1945 and of the restoration. It was good to see there the cross of nails given by Coventry Cathedral and a film of the installation of the beautiful Tower Cross presented by UK donors. Dresdeners have come to terms with the bombing, now almost history (as have the citizens of Coventry with their memories). Any revival of anti-British feeling brought on by the anniversary was well hidden by the natural, laid-back courtesy of the local Saxon population.

The other unforeseen eventuality of this trip was that temperatures were sub-zero throughout, with icy winds and snow showers. Our first operatic excursion was to see a matinée performance of Offenbach's *Die Schöne Helena* at the Staatsoperette. This entailed a twenty-minute taxi journey through a snowstorm, to find a smallish intimate theatre, of faded splendour, with an audience reassuringly reminiscent of the matinée audience at the Oxford Playhouse. The production itself was a real romp, hugely popular with the audience, incorporating much contemporary political and social comment (as do productions of *Die Fledermaus* in Vienna and *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* in Paris). Act

III incorporated a ballet to the music of *Zorba the Greek* (geddit?). The musical standard was appropriate to the production.

The Saxony State Opera House (or Semperoper after its founder) must be one of the most beautiful and acoustically perfect in the world. Lovingly restored to its pre-war form (thanks to the survival of the original designs discovered in Vienna), the eclectic decoration of walls and ceilings of the auditorium and its surrounds is sheer delight. The faux-marble plaster pillars (incorporating the product of a sponsoring brewery) are completely convincing. Inside the auditorium, a redesign of the seating gives everyone a full, democratic, view of the stage (except the royal box). The stage is enormous.

From the very first notes it was clear that *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* was to be a very special operatic experience. Playing, under the baton of Michael Boder, was the Dresden Staatskapelle Orchestra, which made such an impression on its visit to the UK last year. Strauss' rich scoring was mellowed by the marvellous acoustic. The first impression was sustained unflaggingly throughout the evening. The opera is a 'quest' opera (a plot worthy of Harrison Birtwistle, in today's terms). The Empress (originally a gazelle) has no shadow - a symbol of barrenness. It is a condition of her transformation that she acquire a shadow within a year or her Emperor turns to stone. Three days remain. The Empress sets off down to earth, accompanied by her nurse. The story relates her attempts to obtain a shadow from the wife of a dyer, Barak. On the point of success the Empress relents but her sacrifice pays off and a shadow appears. In this production the shadow is bright red, to distinguish it from shadows the lighting designer was unable to conceal. The opera ends with a chorus of unborn children.

The production (dating from 1996 but as fresh as new) is a magical fantasy. Within a simple shell-like structure with portholes through which apparitions appear and disappear, changes of mood and scene were conveyed by imaginative lighting effects. The interaction between the worlds of the Empress and the dyer is (to use the language of physics) mediated by a host of fantastical creatures and visual effects worthy of the wilder shores of *Star Trek* or *Dr Who*. (In this it contrasts with the excellent 1981 production by WNO with its purple drapes and heavy symbolism. Can this be revived at the new Millennium Centre?) The singing was superb. Outstanding was the performance of Gabriele Schnautz as the dyer's wife, showing immense stamina and power in this demanding role, closely followed by Ildiko Szönyi as the nurse and Jukka Rasilainen, Barak, who gave brilliant characterisations. Susan Antony sang the Empress and Stephen Gould, the Emperor. The ovations were well deserved!

The restoration of the monuments, palaces and galleries, with their magnificent collections, in the centre of Dresden is nearing completion. Many of the art treasures were recognised from their exhibition in London following the severe flooding a few years ago. Only the railway station (an exculpatory target of the bombing) still requires

much attention! A last visit was to two collections in the Royal Palace. One was the reassembly of the fabulous collection of jewellery of Augustus the Strong in the so-called 'Green Vaults' (all completely useless, as the audio-guide takes pains to emphasise throughout). The other, a final bonus, was the newly reopened *Kupferstichkabinett* with a celebratory exhibition of steamily erotic copper etchings, including both biblical and mythological subjects, selected from their vast collection.

The Garden Path

Mozart: *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, 2 February 2006.

What is it, apart from the glorious music, that separates Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* from the rest of the operatic repertoire? It is the plot. Outside Wagner's Ring cycle, the story of most operas is straightforwardly (if not always plausibly) concerned with the vicissitudes and adventures of one or two characters, whose emotions and motivations are explored in depth. The rest of the cast, however much their characters are developed, are there in support of the principals and the main story line. The reader will find it surprisingly difficult to think of counter-examples to this generalisation. There are exceptions and it is noteworthy that these are among the greatest operatic scores, with a richness of independent sub-plot, which point to aspects of the main drama; one thinks of Papageno and Papagena or of Nannetta and Fenton in *Falstaff*, for example. Two outstanding examples from earlier centuries are the tragicomedies of Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, with the stories of Octavia and Seneca, and Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, with Cornelia and Sesto. From the twentieth century we have *Der Rosenkavalier*, where most of the third act is devoted to the comeuppance of Baron Ochs (a much maligned character who deserves credit for inspiring one of the most hilarious scenes in all opera).

Figaro is different (as are to a lesser extent the other 'da Ponte' operas). There are no less than five equally important characters and there are two closely intertwined stories. One is the attempt to shame the philandering Count Almaviva by arranging a garden assignation with Susanna, replaced by the disguised Countess; the other concerns attempts to thwart the marriage of Figaro and Susanna through a promissory note held by Marcellina (resolved when she is revealed as his mother). Ubiquitous is the amorous page Cherubino, who causes mayhem whenever he appears. Underlying the comedy runs a darker stream of suspicion and jealousy. (At her inaugural lecture as Hambro Professor of Opera, some years ago, Judith Weir was asked why the plots of her operas were so complicated. 'Have you ever tried to explain to anyone the final garden scene of *Figaro*?' she replied. I am not going to attempt to.)

First experienced in concert performance by Colin Davis' Chelsea Opera Group, *Figaro* has been seen many times, memorably with Geraint Evans as Figaro and Schwarzkopf as Susanna in 1950. (In the light of her later *persona*, one forgets this was one of Schwarzkopf's best roles.) The most remarkable performance had a dream cast of Krause, della Casa, Freni, Siepi, Stratas, Nancy Williams and Coreno. This was shortly after the opening of the New Met in 1967; the sets, designed by Oliver Messel, oddly had the first scene in a kitchen rather than an antechamber. Much more recently, the opera was seen in the restored 'Estates Theatre' in Prague, a performance indifferent in itself, but such was the ambience and the atmosphere of the theatre where the composer himself conducted the opera in 1787 that the occasion left a lasting impression. One could not help but muse on differences in sound and spectacle between then and now! In 2000 the opera was seen at Glyndebourne. This was part of Graham Vick's aberrant legacy of the three da Ponte operas and was the production recently revived 'On Tour' to Oxford. In this production the simple black and white costumes and décor were initially intriguing but ultimately dead boring in spite of some good singing with Peter Mattei in the title role. (At least it was not as bad as the unspeakable staging of *Don Giovanni* where even closing one's eyes did not help much).

On this occasion, the offer of good amphitheatre seats tempted us to take the path to Covent Garden by means of the X90 bus, to see the Royal Opera's new, anniversary-marking production of *Figaro* directed by David McVicar and conducted by Antonio Pappano. The cast, widely cosmopolitan, was largely unknown to us but contained the familiar Gerald Finley as the Count and Philip Langridge as Basilio. The Swedish Miah Persson, who sang Susanna, was previously encountered in 2003 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris playing one of three aspiring sopranos, complete with pushy mum, in *L'Opera Seria*, a wonderful contemporary send-up of the genre, by Florian Leopold Gassmann (1729-1774).

This production is an unqualified success, visually, vocally and dramatically, thoroughly worthy of the occasion. It is worthy of being judged against the highest standards, which is what I attempt to do. Transferred to a French château in 1830, the handsome sets and accurate period costumes designed by Tanya McCallin provided a near-perfect backdrop to the action (notwithstanding the references to Seville). My only reservation was that the opening scene, 'a partly furnished room, with an easy chair in the centre' was more of a cluttered linen closet, to which this Susanna would have a much stronger objection than to the proximity of the Count's bedroom. The scene change to the Countess' bedroom at the end of the first Act (the performance had only one interval) began before the end of the final stanza of *non più andrai*, which I found distracting (but this is a personal phobia of moving scenery while the music plays).

This production emphasised the suspicion and jealousy of the plot so that it was not until Act III that these elements really came into balance with the comedy; the previous

Acts powerfully represented the strength of the emotions. Act IV was the usual confusion, but did contain Marcellina's often-cut aria, beautifully and dramatically sung by the Chilean, Graciela Araya.

It is hard to fault the vocal performance of any of the singers. Erwin Schott showed himself to have the makings of a great Figaro - if he is not already there. He gave a sensitive interpretation mixing the emotions of self-confidence (*se vuol ballare*) through self-doubt and suspicion of Susanna to uproarious delight at the discovery of his parents. Persson's Susanna shows great promise and she has a wonderful voice but her characterisation still lacks some of the liveliness and flirtatiousness shown by her predecessors. She did not make the most of her scene with Marcellina in Act I, which I have seen much more amusingly depicted. Likewise, the Cherubino of Rinat Shaham did not quite catch the confused intensity of the amorous teenager. (These two singers will perform Fiordiligi and Dorabella at Glyndebourne.)

Gerald Finley, in an unusually strong portrayal of the Count as a potential wife-beater, and Dorothea Rösckmann as his potential victim both gave stupendous vocal and dramatic performances: she in conveying both the dignity and the misery of her condition; he, in trying to hide his infidelity and his bullying nature from the other characters and from the hoards of eavesdropping servants with whom the château was staffed. This was another unusual well thought out feature of the production, the drama being played out against the background of the everyday running of a country household. The full Covent Garden Orchestra under Pappano gave a firm, if unobtrusive, backing to the business on stage.

This is an exceptional production of *Figaro*, a triumph for the Royal Opera House. It gives a modern psychological interpretation of Beaumarchais' characters without betraying the stylistic and musical origins of the opera. This production should stand the test of time. Do all you can to see it!

Riga Opera Festival

Shostakovich: *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*; Mozart: *Le Nozze di Figaro*; Tchaikowsky: *The Queen of Spades*; Wagner: *Das Rheingold*, 8-12 June 2006.

The Riga Opera Festival offered four contrasted operas on four successive nights. Warnings that the streets were dangerous at night proved unfounded, the stroll through the park back to the hotel after the operas so much more pleasant and safer than the exodus from Oxford's New Theatre or the scramble for a taxi at the Royal Opera House. During the day one was able, with an excellent and knowledgeable guide, to explore the heart of this beautiful city, in particular the mainly redbrick Hanseatic Old Town and the

extraordinary *art nouveau* district, dating from a brief period of great prosperity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an important Russian Baltic port. Façade after façade competes for the most outrageous *jugendstil* decoration from a group of architects led by Eisenstein, the father of the film director. Now, one of the least wealthy of the new EU member states with divided Latvian and Russian populations, Riga offers itself to tourists with a self-deprecating air, tempting them with the lowest of prices for exquisite linen, amber and chocolate. Our first opera, the day of arrival, introduced us to the delightful small, nine hundred seat, opera house, with its beautiful light green and gold decoration recently restored.

The opera was *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* by Shostakovich. The story is a variant of those of Emma Bovary and Katya Kabanova, desperate housewives with oft-absent husbands, tempted into disastrous adulterous affairs. Instead of the guilt-ridden Katya's domineering mother-in-law, the amoral Katerina Ismaylova has a lecherous father-in-law. But this is melodrama, not tragedy. Katerina poisons her father-in-law, murders her husband with the help of Sergei, her lover, and drags with her to a watery grave Sergei's new mistress while en route to prison. The powerful score, more symphonic than operatic in nature, underlies the depravity of the action with long orchestral interludes between scenes. The production was superb, particularly the handling of detail within the crowd scenes with exceptionally strong acting from the minor characters as well as from the principals. Aira Rūrāne gave a magnificent performance in the erotically charged role of Katerina Ismaylova ably supported (so to speak) by Sergejs Naida as the lover. This was an unforgettable, genuinely Russian, theatrical experience. The Director was Andrejs Žagars and the performance brilliantly conducted by Mārtiņš Ozoliņš

The second night we attended a performance advertised as *Le Nozze di Figaro*. The singing was excellent and the orchestral accompaniment beautifully played, conducted by Zbigniew Graca. The problem was that the production was such an appalling distraction that one completely failed to appreciate the musical quality until the beginning of Act III, when the director temporarily ran out of ideas and the music spoke for itself. The director had got hold of the loony idea that the social structure and personal relationships of the Almaviva household were reflected in the backstage intrigues of an opera company. Thus, the overture was accompanied by the cast of a performance of the opera taking a curtain call, after which Scene One opened in the theatre's dressing room. From there on things became unspeakably worse until Act III with its brief respite during which *Dove Sono* was beautifully sung by Maija Kovalevska, an unusually youthful and slender Countess. (A pair of dancers failed to distract.) Act IV was set on a tropical island. The director responsible for this outrage is the young Bulgarian-born Vera Nemirova. Remember her name; avoid her productions. This entertainment had little to do with Mozart. We could have been warned. Our sympathy lay with the performers.

The *Queen of Spades* was a glorious production, with the same conductor and director as *Lady Macbeth*, elaborately staged. Musically it reminded one of Welsh National Opera at its best, with a magnificent chorus and the orchestra responding superbly to the conductor. Žagars has moved the action forward from Pushkin's 1820's and Tchaikovski's 18th century to post-soviet St Petersburg and in a programme note gives a biographical sketch of each character in this setting. The story of the outsider, Herman, obsessed with learning the Countess' secret combination of winning cards to enable him to marry Lisa with whom he has fallen in love, translates without difficulty, if not entirely satisfactorily, into modern times. The social formality is replaced by modern 'casual'. Catherine the Great is replaced by a swimsuit clad Miss World. The problem with this opera is the climax. What is the nature of the card game in which Herman's last card is the Queen of Spades and not an ace? On this occasion the casino was represented by an array of one-arm-bandits. The performance did not have the terrifying conclusion remembered from WNO's 2000 production.

During the interval we were smugly saying how much better Tchaikovsky sounds with genuine Russian voices with a Russian orchestral sound. It was only later we discovered that Jans Storijs, singing Herman, was none other than Durham-born Ian Story (Eric, in WNO's recent *Dutchman*)! He gave a truly authentic performance, matched by Kristīne Opolais' Lisa. Their distraught final duet was the musical high point of the evening, with the panache of Kristīne Zadovska's performance of Lisa's buddy Pauline's song in Scene Two, in close contention.

Opinions were divided on the new production of *Das Rheingold* directed by Stefan Herhel'm. This was the first instalment of a Ring cycle in collaboration with Bergen Opera, each to have a different director. I hated it! The drama opened with the usual suppressed excitement and anticipation of the extended E flat major chord – a glorious sound if, on this occasion, a little light on string tone. But then the Rhine maidens appeared, dressed as schoolgirls seated at desks, under the tutelage of an explicitly paedophilic Alberich, before reverting to more appropriate dress. However the main theme of the production is revealed in the second scene as an exploration of Wagner himself, in a historical context; the telling of the story takes second place. The stage is populated with Wagner lookalikes (Wotan and Loge) and a parade of characters dressed as historical personages. Thus the music-drama became a parlour game, guessing who was who. For example, we had Fasolt and Fafner as Marx and Engels, though both switching to Wagner masks half way through. The main conversation after the performance was point-scoring on character recognition. This reduced the musical accompaniment to the status of musak, to be commented on only as an afterthought. Though the singing contended well with this distraction, at no point were we overwhelmed by the power of Wagner's music. There was much that was distasteful (in addition to the opening) such as a squad of Nazi storm troopers emerging from Nibelheim, the humiliation of Alberich (one is *not* supposed to feel sorry for him!) and

the fashioning of the gold into symbols of the major world religions. In following the text literally, no adolescent *double entendre* was overlooked. The crudity seriously diminished the impact of this masterpiece of music-drama.

Two outstanding productions out of four is, I suppose, not a bad score these days!

Bastille Days

Donizzetti: *L'Elisir d'Amore*; Berlioz: *Les Troyens*, Opéra Bastille, Paris, 8,9 November 2006.

The opportunity of meeting Swedish Glyndebourne companions in Paris combined with the revival of a production of *Les Troyens* at L'Opéra Bastille was too good to miss. An added delight was a performance of *L'Elisir d'Amore* the previous evening. The result was an action packed five days, thanks to Eurostar. Events included a book launch party at the Cercle Suédois, the Balenciaga exhibition at the newly reopened Musée des Arts Décoratifs, an exhibition of some sixty lesser-known portraits by Titian and contemporaries, an expert guided tour of the Marais district, a concert of music by Marin Marais and a tented *brocante* of antiques in Place Bastille. The exhibition of Balenciaga frocks was fascinating. The discarded form-fitting carapaces carried an erotic charge strangely complementary to the sculptures of Rodin. Titian, my hero, alas and surprisingly, did not come off well in comparison with the Holbeins on view in London. The viol music was too po-faced to do justice to this great composer and marred by terrible acoustics; the *brocante* was impressive but dear. The stimulation of these daytime activities formed a perfect background for two great operas in the evening.

L'Elisir d'Amore I first saw in Oxford Playhouse in 1976 in an imaginative production directed by Graham Vick for Scottish Opera Go Round in which the cast emerged from and departed in a large wicker hamper, which was wheeled onto the stage. The production at the Bastille was revelatory. The director Laurent Pelly reminded me of Peter Stein in his total dedication to interpreting the opera as written. It gave a softer, less sardonic view of Donizzetti than usual. Another comparison is with the films of Eric Rohmer. There is an intimacy which draws the audience into the action. For example when a group of villagers bicycle across the stage waving, it was almost impossible not to wave back. This, in spite of the enormous pit at the Bastille, which gave the conductor, Edward Gardner, problems in synchronising orchestra and singers.

Nemorino, a simple lad, adores Adina, a somewhat prissy young lady wooed by a Sergeant Belcore. Drunk on red wine sold him by Dulcamara, a travelling salesman, as Isolde's Elixir, Nemorino finds himself overwhelmed by the attentions of the village girls,

neither he nor Adina knowing they have discovered he has inherited a fortune from an uncle. These attentions change Adina's heart and all ends happily.

In this production the characters are depicted as real human beings. The singing is uniformly very good while lacking any real tingle factor, though Charles Castronovo comes close in *Una furtiva lagrima*. Heidi Grant Murphy sings Adina, Laurent Naouri, Belcore, and Alberto Rinaldi, Dulcamara. The sets designed by Chantal Thomas create a real rural atmosphere in a beautifully integrated production.

It is great news that Laurent Pelly is directing *La Fille du Régiment* at the Royal Opera House in January.

Les Troyens, in the revival of a 2000 Salzburg Festival production masterminded by the late Herbert Wernicke, is played out within an austere white-walled set with a big fissure down the centre through which the characters enter and exit, in the second part with the sea represented in the background as in baroque theatre. The enormous chorus, clad uniformly in black with Trojans and Carthaginians, distinguished by red or blue gloves, move formally, recalling Greek theatre. The performance is dominated by Deborah Polanski who takes on the double role of Cassandra in the first part *La Prise de Troie*, Didon in *Les Troyens à Carthage*. Vocally and dramatically she is stupendous. Her partners in the action, Goële Le Roi as Ascagne in Troie and Jon Villars as Enée in Carthage are equal to the task of partnering her, giving sustained musical drama in the extended duets: the opening scene on a bleak corpse littered stage and the love scene during the Royal Hunt and Storm.

However, I must quarrel with two aspects. The love scene is accompanied by video images of bombed and burning buildings. My companions interpreted this as symbolising the passion and eroticism of what was going on. If so, it was a post-Freudian passion and eroticism imposed on the opera from outside, not the French romantic eroticism contained in the music. The other disappointments were the great rallying cries *Italie, Italie* at the end of the first act and awakening Enée from his post-coital slumber. These should dominate the opera. In Part 2, we had a man armed with a rifle waking Enée, saying 'its time to get up now to go to Italy!'

These were the only blemishes on a fine realisation of this masterpiece. There are too many scenes to record individually. Particularly poignant was the last scene with Didon, her sister Anna (Elena Zaremba) and an outstanding performance by Kwangchul Youn as Narbal. A wickedly unfair review in the French press said of Anna in the duet with Didon, she 'semble jouer au concours de "Devine qui a le plus gros vibrato?"' - if true, a remark worthy of Berlioz himself! Another complaint in the review is the number of non-French singers singing with imperfect accents. Perhaps this gives us a clue as to why *Les Troyens* does not get the recognition it deserves in France: the French have never

produced singers capable of singing the leading roles. They seem to prefer *Guillaume Tell*, which we saw in a prestigious production at the Bastille in 2003. It has the reputation of being dramatically very weak. It is.

The Opéra Bastille is a monstrosity. The auditorium is cavernous, though the seats are comfortable and the acoustics good but the surroundings are awful, with virtually nowhere to sit in the bar area. Furthermore it was impossible to pre-order interval drinks. I had never expected to hear in France the British Airways excuse: 'it wouldn't be fair on the other passengers'. Is that what they now mean by *égalité*?

Chapter 5 – Classical Operas (1600-1800)

Iphigénie en Glyndebourne

Gluck: *Iphigénie en Aulide*, Glyndebourne, 25 June 2002.

One of the highlights of the 2002 Glyndebourne Festival was a new production of Gluck's 'neglected masterpiece', *Iphigénie en Aulide*. An opportunity to see this opera was eagerly anticipated because of its reputation as introducing, at its first performance in 1774, a new, ground-breaking era into French opera replacing that of Lully and Rameau. It was an instant box-office success and enjoyed an extended period of popularity in Paris with 428 performances before 1824. Its influence on the musical career of Hector Berlioz, who first saw it in Paris in 1822, is documented by David Cairns in his biography of that composer. Wagner made his own adaptation and orchestration of the work, which was performed in Dresden in 1847. However, the first performance in the UK, in Oxford, was not until 1933.

The outline of the myth can be briefly summarised. The Greek invasion fleet for Troy is becalmed in Aulis, because the gods (particularly Diana, with a specific grievance) are generally unhappy about the whole affair. It has been made known from on high that wind will only come as a result of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the daughter of the Greek commander-in-chief, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, his wife. Since everyone is so fed up with hanging around, even Agamemnon finally agrees to go along with this scheme. Iphigenia is to be brought to the sacrificial altar under the pretext of being married to Achilles. At the last moment Diana intervenes; sources differ as to what ensues.

In the Glyndebourne programme, the opera is billed as 'after Jean Racine's tragedy'. It is usually referred to in this way or as 'based on' Racine but this is not really true. Du Roulet the librettist, himself, refers to it in this way in correspondence and certainly incorporates lines adapted from Racine. Perhaps this was to get the opera accepted by French patrons! In fact, Gluck and du Roulet remove all of Racine's additions to the legend as related by Euripides. This includes the character Ériphile, who completely changes the dénouement in Racine's version, as is explained below

It has to be confessed that the performance was a disappointment, either because of dramatic weaknesses in the construction of the opera or because the production failed to do the opera justice. There was certainly no trace of the emotional impact of the Welsh National Opera production of Gluck's later opera, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, seen in Oxford in 1997 with the heart-stopping performance of Diana Montague in the title role. *En Aulide* at Glyndebourne lacked the totally absorbing 'tingle-factor' of the WNO production of its sequel. It may be because *en Aulide*, the stronger female part is given to Clytemnestra (authoritatively performed at Glyndebourne by Katarina Karnéus), rather than to Iphigenia who has rather a passive role until the

end of the opera. The male parts left no lasting impression; justice was not done to Gluck's musical inspiration.

The main distraction was the set, which consisted of three bare white walls (across which occasional coloured stripes would appear). One lost too much concentration wondering what all this was supposed to signify. Within this frame, however, the staging was good, the chorus representing well the bickering of the generals and the frustration of the troops and camp followers, uniformly clad in black; the confrontation with Achilles and his followers was particularly dramatic. However, as is customary Agamemnon is presented as a vacillating politician, rather than a charismatic general and it was hard to believe that his was the beard 'that launched a thousand ships'.

The lasting effect of this production was to induce a fascination for the eponymous heroine and to seek to establish the 'truth' about her. The quest is twofold, her origins and her fate. To establish a basis for this inquiry, my principal source is the contribution on Greek Mythology by F. Guirand to the *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology* (Hamlyn, London, 1959, *NLEM*), though I do not necessarily accept this as reliable.

Although Iphigenia is generally accepted as the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, even this does not go unchallenged. Clytemnestra, herself, was the daughter of Leda and sister, or half-sister, of Helen (later of Troy) and the twins, or half twins, Castor and Pollux. The paternity of this quartet is a subject of some dispute. At the time of their conception, Leda was married to Tyndareus. *NLEM* has it that the same night that Zeus visited Leda in the form of a swan, she lay with her husband afterwards bearing Pollux and Helen, children of Zeus, and Castor and Clytemnestra, children of Tyndareus. Other versions have Helen and the twins born from one egg, children of Zeus, and Clytemnestra from another, daughter of Tyndareus, or even all four fathered by Zeus. There is clearly, here, a strong case for DNA testing. It would appear from Gluck that Clytemnestra regarded herself as being of mortal paternity; how else can one explain her snobbish outburst on hearing of Iphigenia's betrothal to Achilles (son of the Nereid, Thetis):

Quelle triomphe pour vous,
Quelle gloire pour moi!
Aux yeux de tous les Grecs,
Le fils d'une Déesse
Va me nommer sa mère,
Et vous donner sa foi.

So, what of Iphigenia's origins? The picture is complicated by the story of Helen's abduction by Theseus (at the age of ten, according to *NLEM* - a clear case of paedophilia). She was eventually rescued by her twin brothers but there are rumours that she was impregnated by Theseus and bore a daughter. One story has it that this

daughter was Iphigenia, adopted by her aunt, Clytemnestra, and Agamemnon to hide her parentage from Menelaus in order to avoid endangering Helen's marriage prospects. This strikes me as totally implausible. Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon to avenge the sacrifice of a *niece* is a very weak basis on which to launch the tragedies of the Oresteia! But there may have been a daughter of Helen and Theseus and this hypothesis is central to the drama as told by Racine, among others. Racine researched the subject thoroughly, as is recounted in his *Préface* to *Iphigénie*, where he gives the sources of these rumours. His solution, as a dramatist, is to introduce the character, Ériphile, and her companion Doris (*sic*) who are brought to Aulide from Lesbos by Achilles, who has been campaigning there. Despite their provenance, there is no indication that their relationship is other than platonic; in fact, Ériphile has a fatal crush on Achilles.

Racine's Editor, in *La Pléiade* edition of his works opens his introduction to *Iphigénie*:

Certes, l'intérêt du drame est simple, puisqu'il se résume dans cette question: "Iphigénie mourra-t-elle?"

and the same may be said of all versions of the legend, though this is not the only issue. The answer is not invariably a clear-cut 'yes' or 'no'! The problem is that for mythological continuity, Iphigenia (or a look-alike) has to turn up in Tauris sometime later and, what is more, as a virgin priestess. Euripides adopts the 'with a single bound she was free' approach to sequel writing. In two versions of his *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the axe falls or is about to fall at the play's end; at the beginning of *Iphegenia in Tauris*, the heroine explains that at the last moment she was whisked away and deposited in Tauris by the direct intervention of Artemis (Diana).

Racine's ending is different. It turns out that Ériphile is the lost daughter of Helen and Theseus, maybe also really named Iphigénie. Furthermore, it is revealed that the death of any blood relation of Helen will satisfy the conditions of the curse so that Ériphile's suicide satisfies Diana and leaves Iphigénie free to marry Achilles, thus losing her main qualification for the priesthood. Gluck presented two endings to his opera; in both Iphigenia is reprieved at the last moment, in the first version (1774) through the priest, Calchas, as intermediary, on the second (1775) by direct intervention of Diana, herself. In both, Iphigenia is united with Achilles. I suppose that Gluck could argue that the union was never consummated, before Achilles' departure for Troy and hence Iphigenia retained her eligibility to become a priestess of Diana. However, Wagner's version of the opera has Diana appearing before the sacrifice and immediately despatching Iphigenia to Tauris - a much more convincing conclusion!

In the Glyndebourne production, at the moment of sacrifice, the rear wall of the set rises to reveal an Elysian scene, bathed in gold light, from which Diana emerges, as if making a guest appearance from Covent Garden. But then, after her reprieve for Iphegenia and during the very dark music of Gluck's final chorus, Iphigenia is

inexplicably slain by a blow from Agamemnon's sword. (A Swedish companion asserted, without elaboration, that it was a feminist ending.)

Each generation interprets myth according to the spirit of the age. Barry Unsworth has recently published 'The Songs of the Kings' (Hamish Hamilton, 2002). This is, in the form of a novel, an atheistic interpretation in which Iphigenia's death becomes inevitable as a result of a religious and politico-military consensus. She is survived by her slave, Sisipyla, who escapes and, it is implied, goes on to impersonate her in Tauris. However, here is the scenario for a twenty-first century opera 'based on Racine'. Achilles, betrothed to Iphigenia, comes from Lesbos with Ériphile and her lover, Doris. Iphigenia falls passionately in love with Ériphile, unaware that she is her cousin. Doris discovers them together and kills Ériphile in a jealous rage, unknowingly providing the required sacrifice. As the wind rises, a heart-broken Iphigenia vows to dump Achilles and to travel to Tauris to dedicate her life to the service of the goddess, Diana. (I would be pleased to hear from any composer prepared to take this on!)

In the meantime, Glyndebourne will have some awkward questions to answer, should it ever wish to mount a production of *Iphigénie en Tauride*!

Sellars on Tour

Mozart: *Idomeneo*, 2 December; Handel: *Theodora*, 4 December, Glyndebourne Touring Opera, 2003.

The annual visit to Oxford of Glyndebourne Touring Opera took place in the first week of December last year, too late to be reviewed in the *Oxford Magazine* in the last issue of the term. The visit featured two operas directed by Peter Sellars (a director audiences love to hate), co-directed for the Tour by Stephen Barlow and Clare Whistler, respectively. The first of these was *Idomeneo*, Mozart's great *opera seria*, inexplicably neglected for so long; the second was a staged version of Handel's late oratorio, *Theodora*, (not really an opera at all).

The story of Idomeneo, King of Crete, concerns his survival from shipwreck, by the intervention of Neptune, on condition that he sacrifices the first human being he sees on landing. This is his son, Idamante, who loves Ilya, a Trojan princess, and is loved by the Greek princess, Elettra (aka Electra). The drama centres on Idomeneo's efforts to avoid this commitment. (The assumption is that for any other he would have had no compunction.) These efforts include sending Idamante off to accompany Elettra back to Greece. This plan is prevented by Neptune, who brews up a storm and sends a monster to ravage the country. Idamante further exacerbates the situation by killing Neptune's pet monster. Just when the sacrifice appears inevitable, the gods relent, Idomeneo abdicates in favour of Idamante who is united with Ilya. Elettra in a jealous fury goes off to join her brother, Orestes, already with

his own furies. (This would seem to imply that the setting of the opera post-dates the murder of Clytemnestra!)

A 'feature' of the production is that Glyndebourne engaged the distinguished artist, Anish Kapoor, to design the set. This was a mistake. What we get is a light-show in search of a musical accompaniment, instead of a light- show designed to accompany and enhance the music and drama of a great opera. It is singularly ill matched to the clean lines of the recitative-aria form of opera seria and fails completely to dramatise the storm which brings the monster at the climax of act two. And there was no monster! It is interesting to compare it to the set of Glyndebourne's *Tristan und Isolde*, also first seen last year, designed by Roland Aeschlimann. This has a similar concept but is thoroughly integrated into Wagner's drama and plays an important role in the success of that wonderful production.

The costumes were also a bit odd as if the designer wanted to make some vague contemporary ethnic point, distinguishing Trojans, Cretans and Greeks. But Elettra's costume was completely bizarre. Wearing a curly blonde wig and a pink skirt and jacket (changed after the interval to a red trouser suit) she arrived as if making a guest appearance from a modern dress production as the eponymous heroine of the play by Eugene O'Neill. She was singularly ill-dressed for embarking on the journey from Crete to Greece even over a calm sea! (Do designers never read the script?)

The acting bore the director's trademark of gesticulating arms and exaggerated movement - a strange mixture of semaphore, miming and physical jerks. This was not all bad; in the choruses, when not too obtrusive, it enhanced the effect, but in the arias it was a distraction. An innovation was the introduction of doppelgangers of Ilya and Idamante, who mimed the words and sentiments of the singers. Not a good idea Mr Sellars - the surtitles were far more revealing.

Musically the standard was high. Ilya (Marie Arnet) opened act one singing most beautifully and most musically of her divided feelings of loyalty to her father's memory and her growing love for Idamante and sensitively developing her changing emotions during the course of the opera. Idamante (Julianne de Villiers) was a worthy partner, though with not with quite the same charisma. But the stars of the show were Cara O'Sullivan as Elettra and Peter Bröder in the title role. O'Sullivan was electrifying, her powerful voice expressing magnificently the love, jealousy, hope and finally jealous rage turned to hatred and bitterness at the end. Bröder represented impressively the emotions of Idomeneo, in particular in his great aria 'Fuor del Mar'. It was a shame that this was marred by the false gestures of the director instead of natural gestures of the drama.

On the whole, the orchestra played well under Kenneth Montgomery, except that there was some inexcusably ragged wind ensemble playing near the beginning. Also there was a group of brass players who caused distraction by entering the pit just

before the finale. Surely the same rule should apply to the orchestra as to the audience - true professionals should not object to sitting through the act!

The greatness of *Idomeneo* as an opera stems from the way the characters develop their relationships as they twist and turn under the threat over Idamante. It must be to the credit of the director that this drama was transmitted through the production to the audience.

Theodora, seen two days later, was originally billed as a dramatic oratorio, though perhaps the only way a non-expert can tell the difference from an opera is that it is divided into three parts rather than three acts. Unlike the dramatic complexities of *Idomeneo*, this is a straightforward narrative of the martyrdom of Theodora, known to us now as St Dorothea, who escapes a fate worse than death only to die by execution. Theodora belongs to a group of Christians, led by Irene, who are prepared to defy an edict of the Roman, Valens, that all should worship his gods. Two Roman goodies, Didymus and Septimius, declare themselves against this edict and Didymus goes so far as to put his life on the line by helping Theodora to escape from a prison cell where she has been condemned to gang rape by Roman soldiery. Hearing Didymus has been captured, Theodora gives herself up in an attempt to save his life but both are executed.

This production was first seen (or avoided) at Glyndebourne in 1996, following a disgraceful production of *Zauberflöte* on Sellars' debut there the year before. It is notorious for the arm waving and gesticulation which we saw also in *Idomeneo*, which was still found unacceptable when *Theodora* was shown on television a year or two later. On this occasion, the gesturing seemed less offensive, perhaps for one of two reasons. Either audiences have been so battered by outrageous productions in the interim that they have become inured or the gesturing itself has been softened to be more musical and less obtrusive. I believe the latter is the more likely. As with *Idomeneo*, in parts it was almost acceptable. Nevertheless, there remained a tension between music and action.

The settings and costumes are modern. Valens (Henry Waddington) who opens the proceedings is convincing as a boorish, bullying tyrant of the type all too common in the modern world and there are many countries in recent history in which the opera could be set. Unfortunately, his attempt at wickedness nearly broke his voice in his first aria. Theodora was sung by Vanessa Woodfine, substituting for the indisposed Anne-Lise Sollied. She acquitted herself more than adequately in the circumstances. After a slightly tentative start, her singing and dramatic presentation gave a touching portrayal of this tragic heroine. The prison scene, in which she was symbolically confined by a square of light, was particularly moving. The counter-tenor singing Didymus was disappointing but, musically, the stars of the show were Christine Rice, with her warm mezzo, and Paul Nilon as Septimius.

The decision to see this production was a late one, based on the rave reviews in the press for the conducting of Emmanuelle Haïm. Haïm burst onto the English musical scene with the concert performance of *Orfeo* in 2002, conducting her own Concert d'Astrée in an unforgettable musical experience. Alas, in Oxford, the baton was taken by Laurence Cummings. The opening bars of the overture were terrible! Although things improved a great deal for much of parts one and two, by the end of part two, Handel was on his own. The final scene was devoted to a realistic staging of the execution by lethal injection of Theodora and Didymus. This was very powerful stuff in itself but left little for Handel to do - the music seemed superfluous.

This production exemplified the dilemma of modern audiences for opera (baroque opera in particular) these days - whether to go for staged performances, risking a production which distracts from, rather than enhances, enjoyment of the music or whether to play safe and make do with concert performances. This was brought home on this occasion in that the previous week there was, at the Barbican, a concert version of Handel's *Xerxes* with a star-studded cast, under the baton of William Christie, with Les Arts Florissants. This was totally engrossing from the first bar to the last, three and a half hours later (a similar length to *Theodora*). This was, in fact, a concert version (for reasons of economy?) of a staging in Paris. How this was received is not known. However, a modern dress staging of Rameau's *Les Boréades* in Paris in March involving the same musicians was panned by the critics (*inter alia* castigating Barbara Bonney for her 'baroque Esperanto')! The same production in concert at the Barbican was utterly magical.

Of course, in concert versions one is short-changed on the visual element, important to the full appreciation of baroque opera. These days one strives for authenticity in instrumentation and musical sound -why not visually as well? (One could go too far: I once sat next to a German musicologist at a concert performance of a baroque opera. She complained bitterly that it was not authentic. By this, she did not mean the absence of costumes and décor. Rather the fact that the audience were not eating and drinking and talking during the performance!) However, one must not rule out non-period settings. Two recent productions illustrate how a sympathetic director can make them work. Glyndebourne's *Rodelinda*, of 1998, and the prime example, the staging of Handel's other great late oratorio, *Jephtha*, by Katie Mitchell for Welsh National Opera, a poignant and harrowing production with a similar plot structure to *Idomeneo* set in biblical times.

Directing opera is not like directing spoken drama. In the latter the director is free to make his own interpretation of the story. In opera, an interpretation has already been given by the composer. It is the director's task to visualise and build on this interpretation, not to impose an additional, alternative interpretation of his own. This discipline should be fundamental to all opera production. Opera managers should not employ directors who do not understand this.

Sarastro – the Opera

Mozart: *Die Zauberflöte*, Glyndebourne, 2 July 2004.

The most eagerly awaited production at this year's Glyndebourne Festival was undoubtedly the new *Die Zauberflöte*, directed by Adrian Noble with Vladimir Jurowski conducting the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. There was a general hope and expectation that this would atone for the disgraceful Sellar's production of 1990. In the event, critical response was divided. There was unanimity that this was a simplified version, discarding much masonic solemnity (which I have never found particularly obtrusive) and having an appeal to the child in the spectator. One side viewed it as infantile, the other as child-like. Thus, Robert Thicknesse gave a comprehensively damning review in *The Times* (May 22) headed 'A cutesy Flute for the under-fives' while Hugh Canning in *The Sunday Times* (30 July) had 'a spectacle to bring out the child in you'. The latter in a slightly contradictory by-line described the new staging as 'sexy and funny'. (It was not sexy - even in the sense that dossiers are supposed to be.) Familiarity with these critics tempted one to prejudge the production but nevertheless one approached it with an open mind!

For a director dedicated to the interpretation of this singspiel of Mozart and Schikaneder, not obsessed with imposing a personal view on the work, the first act produces few problems. It is, indeed, a story for children about Prince Tamino, rescued from a serpent by three beautiful ladies. Credit for slaying the serpent is not denied by Papageno, a cheerful bird-catcher who arrives on the scene and is punished by having his lips sealed. The ladies show Tamino a picture of Pamina, missing daughter of the Queen of the Night. The Queen then appears to seek Tamino's assistance in finding her. Up to this point this production was sheer delight, colourful, with an imaginatively alarming monster and a menagerie of other animals (designed by Anthony Ward). Tamino was well sung by Pavol Breslik. Slightly disappointing was Jonathan Lemalu as Papageno who did not really establish a character in the role, though his duet with Pamina was beautifully performed. The Queen (Cornelia Götz) made a dramatic entry; she sang accurately and musically but did not quite have the vocal power and personality to dominate the scene. Even at this stage, where she appears a goodie, she still has to suggest that she would prove a formidable mother-in-law.

Decisions for the director come in the next scene, the first appearances of Pamina and Monostatos, which sets the stage for the rest of the opera. Is Monostatos a pantomime villain or a real villain? Schikaneder's text has a subtle mixture of both. The director's task is to get the right balance. In this production the choice was the former and so the subsequent actions lacked a clear sense of good and evil. Even children like their villains to be a bit scary! Later, the entrance of Sarastro, drawn in a coach by two pantomime lions who pawed the ground in time to the music, was indeed 'cutesy', depriving him of his essential dignity.

The revelation of the evening was Kate Royal as Pamina, substituting for the indisposed Lisa Milne. She seized the attention from her first notes - a natural Mozartian singer with a beautiful voice and personality- giving the part a more positive role than is often the case. (Royal was winner of the 2004 Kathleen Ferrier award!) Sarastro (Peter Rose) was not in good voice, his low notes growled appropriately but there was little tone behind them. An untransformed Papagena flitted in and out of the scene intriguingly but when transformed appeared more like a wood nymph than a fellow bird fancier.

However, in general the trials and tribulations of the second act were enchantingly produced and full of fantasy, particularly the handling of the three boys on a three-wheeled velocipede! The production owed something to the idiosyncratic movie version of Ingmar Bergman (though fortunately it did not go along with his interpretation, recorded by him elsewhere, of Pamina as the daughter of divorcing parents, Sarastro and the Queen of the Night). On its own terms as a children's pantomime, it could have been an unqualified success. Unfortunately, the sublimity of Mozart's music, sublimely played and sublimely sung, kept breaking through the dialogue, reminding us that there is much more to the story than appears on the surface.

Blow by Blow

John Blow: *Venus and Adonis*, New Chamber Opera Studio, New College Ante-Chapel, 14 February; Sir John Eliot Gardiner Masterclass, 15 February 2005.

The entries under John Blow in many music dictionaries start with information that he was born in Newark in 1649, *not in South Collingham, as was once believed*. I am intrigued by this italicised inclusion and puzzled by any possible musicalological significance! Blow can be put in the context of his continental contemporaries, Lully, b 1632, Buxtehude, b 1637, Corelli, b 1653, but most importantly in relation to the slightly younger Henry Purcell, b 1659, who was also his student. The careers of Blow and Purcell were closely intertwined, centred on the musical life of Church and State in London. In particular, Blow gave up the job of organist at Westminster Abbey in 1697 to his more talented junior, taking it up again on Purcell's premature death in 1695. It was during this interim that Blow wrote, as 'a masque for the entertainment of the King', what is now known to be England's first opera, *Venus and Adonis*. It is believed to have first been performed at Charles II's court in 1682 and again at 'Mr JOSIAS PREIST's Boarding School in CHELSEY' by 'Young Gentlewomen' in 1684. This we learn from a contemporary copy of the libretto distributed as the programme for the performance under review.

Venus and Adonis has intriguing connections with Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* composed a year or two later (thus England's second opera) with a similar early performance record. They would make a fascinating double bill. But the occasion for

this performance and that of *Dido* last year ('Dido Dissected' – Chapter 2) was to benefit from Sir John Eliot Gardiner's tenure of the Hambro Chair of Opera to offer enlightenment to performers and audience alike on the interpretation of these two masterpieces. The two operas have a mirror symmetry. In one the heroine dies, in the other, the hero. Venus and Adonis are about to embark on a passionate relationship but before consummating it Venus sends Adonis out hunting, to get some healthy exercise. He is gored by a boar, staggering home to die in Venus' arms. Is this the same boar, killed by Aeneas, during the royal hunt and storm when he consummates his love for Dido?

The semi-staged performance, appropriately on St Valentine's Day, was directed by Michael Burden and accompanied by four strings, two flutes and harpsichord, conducted by Stephen Rice. Katharine Fuge sang a seductive Venus (originally sung by Charles II's mistress, Moll Davies), Kate Semmens made a wicked Cupid (originally played by the ten-year old Lady Mary Tudor, daughter of Charles and Moll), Maciek O'Shea played a suitably ardent Adonis and Robert Brooks, Little Cupid. Young Mr Brooks gave great character to his role, his voice blending perfectly with the two sopranos.

Musically, this was a revelation to one unfamiliar with Blow and his opera, to whom it was revealed as a jewel of a masterpiece, with seductive melodies and foot-tapping dance music. Although with a strong French influence, the word setting had echoes of Monteverdi - in the morality of the play, the heartfelt cries *Venus, Venus, Venus and Adonis, Adonis, Adonis* and the scored laughter. How familiar was Blow with such music? There seems little known. The opera was played to a packed audience in the completely inappropriate surroundings of the New College Ante-Chapel. Cast and orchestra were uniformly dressed in black, emphasising that this was less than half the entertainment; costumes, scenery and dances, which form an important part of the score, were left to the audience's imagination. (One knows little of the nature of the first performances, but they must have been more colourful than this.) Despite being played on modern strings and flutes, the music had a period sound, though baroque bows would have done better justice to the dotted rhythms and wooden flutes or recorders provided a better balance.

The first thing to be said is how well the performers had absorbed the lessons of last term's masterclass! The singing flowed more freely, the words more clearly, and the vowels sounded purer (for the most part) than in the performance of *Dido*. This was above all noticeable in the singing of the chorus. Indeed, Sir John had very little to say about the quality of the singing and was most complimentary at the end. His main contribution this time was to the dramatic presentation. Replacing the single chair by a bench, the nearest the chapel could come to a *chaise-longue*, (let alone a bed), he pointed out that the opera was a mixture of sublime music, libidinous innuendo and court satire - 'At Court I find constant and true/ Only an Aged Lord or two'. Gardiner's directorial genius was to give the act one encounter between Venus and Adonis an erotic charge that almost merited a PG rating. One wonders what Mr

Preist's young gentlewomen made of it. The relationship generated between the lovers carried over to give added poignancy to the death -scene in which the singing was inspired.

One yearns to see a full performance of these productions of *Dido* and *Venus*, with costumes and dances and in a more appropriate setting - before the influence of Gardiner's coaching has worn off! Why not a New Chamber Opera and Dance Studio? The addition is indispensable if they want seriously to promote the appreciation of early music drama, in which dance plays such an integrated role.

Handel with care

Jephtha, New College Chapel, 8 June 2005. *Hercules*, Sheldonian Theatre, 25 June 2005. *Giulio Cesare*, Glyndebourne, 7 July 2005.

When I was young, Handel was known to the general music lover for *Messiah*, the *Water Music*, the *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, '*The Harmonious Blacksmith*' and other keyboard works, including organ concertos, and various concerti grossi. Of his vocal work, one heard the *Coronation Anthems*, the occasional oratorio or one of the dramatic works, such as *Alexander's Feast*. With a few occasional exceptions, his operas were only known from anthologies of recitatives and arias, the accompaniment usually badly arranged for piano. What was completely missing was the opportunity to hear these arias strung together and to appreciate the emotion and dramatic tension that can be generated by a sequence of recitative and *da capo* aria in this composer's hands. The gradual rediscovery of Handel's *opera seria*, coinciding with the advent of the compact disc, has added a whole new dimension to one's assessment of the composer. The now firmly established renaissance is due to the work of many musicologists and musicians in preparing performing editions (each in their own version of 'authenticity'). Handel now takes his place on a par with Monteverdi, Mozart, Wagner and Verdi as a draw to the opera house. It is remarkable that Joseph Kerman, in his influential monograph of 1956, *Opera as Drama*, only mentions Handel in passing. It is less excusable that this was not changed in the 1988 edition. I am very surprised by the view of John Elliot Gardiner (expressed during his tenure of the Hambro Chair of Opera) that the operas of Rameau are superior to Handel's *opera seria*. Within his formula, Handel has a far greater range of emotional expression and dramatic development; the unrelieved tension is often almost unbearable. Rameau one attends out of curiosity, Handel in anticipation of the infinite variety of his invention.

Reported here are three contrasted performances of Handel: the oratorio *Jephtha* in New College, the music drama *Hercules* in the Sheldonian and the opera *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* at Glyndebourne.

As with Verdi's last two operas, *Falstaff* and *Otello*, Handel's last two great oratorios, *Theodora* and *Jephtha* have a quality which sets them apart from their composer's other works. Although written as oratorios, these works are wholly operatic in plot and in musical form (though with a larger part for the chorus than in the operas). It is possibly only for the Lord Chancellor's ban on the staging of religious subjects that they were never produced in this form in Handel's lifetime. However, both of them have been presented in stage versions in recent years - Peter Sellars production of *Theodora* was a controversial, though valid, interpretation. Katie Mitchell's staging of *Jephtha* (originally for WNO but recently completing a run at ENO) set in the twentieth century (opinions differ as to whether the Middle East, the Balkans or the Second World War was intended) was a totally convincing operatic experience. It is an illustration of Handel's genius that the work can withstand such re-setting.

Nevertheless, listening to *Jephtha* as an oratorio is a completely different to experiencing it on the stage. On the stage, the adaptation individualises and personalises the characters and tells the story; the oratorio emphasises the biblical context and the contemplative element. It is the story of a father forced to sacrifice a child as a return for a divine favour - a story that has other operatic manifestations in *Idomeneo* and *Iphigenia*. In each case the victim is spared at the last moment by the intervention of the appropriate deity.

This performance, in New College Chapel, was the last by the New Chamber Opera Studio to be conducted by Stephen Rice as Studio Director. Oxford musical life owes him a lot for the work he has done with the Studio. *Jephtha* can be regarded as the third production in a sequence following *Dido and Aeneas* and *Venus and Adonis* that were subjected to the masterclass scrutiny of Professor Gardiner. *Jephtha* is, of course, far more complex and weightier than the earlier works and presented a real challenge to the Studio, making heavier demands on the soloists. In the event they gave a moving, musical performance which held the audience's attention throughout its long duration. The two leading sopranos were again Kate Semmens, as Iphis, the victim, and Kathryn Whitney as her mother, Storge. Both gave mixed performances. The latter was disappointing in her opening number but sang beautifully in later arias. Semmens also did not sing with her usual consistency but one of the highlights of the evening was her perfectly matched duet, *These Labours Past*, with the countertenor Matthew Venner as Hamor. Venner and Kirsty Anderson as the Angel (not credited in the programme!) were the outstanding vocal soloists showing how to sing clearly even in the acoustic of the chapel. Mention must also be made of some virtuoso playing by one of the bassoonists.

One sometimes gets the impression that this company does not regard the communication of the text as the highest priority. They would have learned a lot from a fascinating masterclass given by Ian Partridge. This formed part of the second Handel in Oxford weekend, presented by the renowned conductor Harry Christophers, with his vocal group, The Sixteen, and orchestra, The Symphony of Harmony and Invention. Oxford is very fortunate that Christophers has chosen it as a

venue for the performance of Handel's works. Partridge coached six talented and responsive young singers in arias from *Samson* and *Jephtha*, giving insight into the difficulties of singing the diphthongs and consonants of the English language, in order to make the text intelligible to an audience, avoiding traps like 'Come for tea' for 'Comfort ye'.

The centrepiece of this Festival Weekend was a concert performance of the seldom-performed 'Music Drama', *Hercules*, somewhere between opera and oratorio. It took place in the Sheldonian Theatre where Handel had a remarkable success in 1733. The discomfort of the venue today, though probably not as severe as when thousands crammed in on that occasion, remains on the verge of the intolerable.

Hercules tells of the fatal consequences of the unfounded jealousy of his wife, Dejanira, for the Princess Iole, mourning her father, with whom he returns home from his labours. He is killed by a poisoned cloak that Dejanira believes is to restore his love for her. It is a typical operatic plot of the baroque period. However, in its realisation it is lacking in the coherence of Handel's best dramas. While full of the most beautiful music, original in invention and ferocious in demands on the players, it fails to engage the audience's feelings for the characters and their predicaments, in the way that Handel's earlier great operas and later oratorios do.

From the first notes of the overture, Christophers' gave a delicate accompaniment to the singers with a characteristically jaunty beat. Although rising to well-judged choral climaxes at the end of each act, a rather more gutsy approach to some of the arias might have been more appropriate. The accompaniment of just two cellos and one violone in support of some dozen upper strings gave a slight imbalance to the orchestral sound, in spite of the indefatigable keyboard playing of the harpsichordist Alastair Ross. (Ross will be long remembered for his insightful performance of the *Goldberg Variations* at a Coffee Concert earlier in the Term.) The singing of both soloists and chorus was remarkable. Notably consistent was James Gilchrist as Hyllas, but one will long remember Susan Bickley as Dejanira for her fiendishly difficult aria when she realises her fatal mistake, Eric Owens for his magnificently raging account of Hercules' death scene, the Sixteen in their 'jealousy' chorus and the orchestral accompaniment of the final chorus with two baroque horns from the Bate collection. A truly authentic baroque evening in authentic surroundings, even though historians would tell us that the attentiveness of the audience was not authentic!

The following morning, in Magdalen College, leaders from The Symphony with singers, Grace Davidson and Mark Dobell, gave a concert of chamber music rarities. A thrilling performance of Vivaldi's early trio sonata setting of *La Folia* variations, rivalling those of Corelli and Marais, had the violinists Walter Reiter and Miles Golding in virtuosic competition. A Purcell chaconne and three exquisitely performed short cantatas by Handel completed the programme.

Giulio Cesare in Egitto is one of Handel's greatest operas and hence one of the all-time greats! It deals with the complex inter-relationships, personal, political and sexual, of the eight main characters. It therefore requires a cast of eight equally matched great singers. It has a double plot: it tells, on one hand, of the attempts of Cleopatra to seduce Caesar to help her in her power struggle with her brother, Tolomeo, (a comedic element) and, on the other, (a tragic element) the quest for revenge by Pompey's widow, Cornelia and their son, Sesto, for the gruesome murder at the start of the opera. The challenge for the director is to get these two interacting elements in balance; there is little scope for extraneous intervention.

This year's Glyndebourne production, directed by David McVicar, conducted by William Christie has to stand comparison with a near-perfect interpretation seen at the Kennedy Centre, Washington, in 2000, under the musical direction and influence of Will Crutchfield (a conductor who seems little known in Europe). That performance received a well-merited spontaneous standing ovation at the end.

At Glyndebourne the curtain rises on an authentic baroque stage set with rolling waves in the harbour in the rear. However, instead of being populated with soldiers in Roman armour, they are dressed in red tunics of a modern colonial era, carrying firearms. The only apparent reason for this change of century is that it enables Cleopatra, in her seduction scene, to be presented as a cabaret coquette; likewise the cavorting of the Egyptian court is presented in the form of a night-club dance routine. Danielle de Niese (Cleopatra) gave a stupendous performance, immensely popular with at least half the audience. However it did distort the balance of the production, preventing a proper synthesis with the tragic element beautifully depicted in the mother-son relationship of Cornelia (Patricia Bardon) and Sesto (Angelika Kirchschlager), she, proud of her son's thirst for vengeance yet fearful of his fate. Their heart-rending duets at the end of parts one and two were the supreme musical moments of the evening. Christopher Maltman gave an excellent performance as the duplicitous Accilla. But, to me, the great disappointment of the evening was Sarah Connolly as Caesar. Although she gave a deeply felt musical interpretation of the role, it was not suited to her voice. (It was originally written for alto castrato. Authenticity has yet to go that far!) Dramatically, she lacked the stage presence of the other principals which led to a lack of balance in some of her scenes.

William Christie conducted the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. This ensemble has a timbre different to his own Arts Florissants. It is a much larger group than the Symphony of Harmony and Invention and with, to my ears, a far more balanced tone. For me it wins the accolade for the most authentic sound for the accompaniment of Handel Opera.

Sarastro - the Musical

Jean-Philippe Rameau: *Zoroastre*, Drottningholms Slottsteater, Sweden, 16 August 2005.

No one who claims to be seriously interested in baroque opera should fail to attend a performance at Drottningholm's Slottsteater, not far from the centre of Stockholm. Not only does one see there authentic productions of baroque opera in period costume accompanied by period instruments, but one also experiences the operas seated packed together on baroque hard benches at non-air-conditioned temperatures. Such is the authenticity of the whole occasion, however, that the discomfort is readily tolerated once the performance begins.

The small, 454 seat theatre was built in 1766 at Drottningholm Palace, the summer residence of the Swedish royal family, at the request of Queen Lovisa Ulrika, but its heyday was between 1777 and 1792 during the reign of King Gustav III. Following his death, the theatre was more or less forgotten until the 1920s, when, under the guidance of a theatre historian Agne Beijer, restoration was carried out, stage machinery was repaired, wax candles were replaced by electric lamps and the collection of original scenery copied. The theatre reopened in 1922, since when there have been annual seasons of opera and ballet. A recent innovation is new modern stage lighting which some find too harsh and mechanical in operation for the period atmosphere. Over the years a number of remarkable productions have been seen. I mention two. In 2000, a production of Handel's *Tamurlano*, with a chilling scene depicting the suicide of Bejazet, made a strong contribution to the corpus of modern productions of Handel's *opere serie*. In 2004, a very bizarre work entitled *Cecilia och Apkungen* (translated as 'Cecilia and The Monkey King') showed how the baroque theatre could be a perfect setting for the staging of a modern opera. This work by Reine Jönsson which conflates two stories, in part based on a children's cartoon, was completely comprehensible to the many engrossed young people in the audience, while utterly baffling to their elders!

Three productions were staged in 2005, Marivaux's play 'The Triumph of Love' (1732), an operatic version of 'The Taming of the Shrew' from 1795 and, the subject of this review, Jean-Philippe Rameau's *tragédie en musique*, *Zoroastre*, in its 1756 version. This production was a rare opportunity to see a staging in full baroque splendour of a Rameau opera. This is in contrast to recent performances by Les Arts Florissants under William Christie, seen at the Barbican after originating in France - a much-panned modern-dress version of *Les Boréades* (seen in concert in London and so lacking any visual effect) and the version of the *comédie lyrique*, *Les Paladins*, in which Rameau's music is used as an accompaniment to a breath-taking spectacular visual show in which back-projection of characters and animals transform back and forth to real actors and dancers.

John Eliot Gardiner is currently promoting his interest in Rameau operas by denigrating Handel's *opera seria* format. *Zoroastre* was an opportunity to compare the composers. This performance was a powerful advocate for Rameau. It must be said, however, that musically he is at his best when at his most Handelian. Handelian arias are separated by long passages of accompanied recitative, delivered on this occasion in the baroque esperanto of non-francophone soloists. Where Rameau scores is in the large set-piece ballet-choruses - a dimension missing in concert performance. The music director was Christophe Rousset, conducting the Drottningholm Theatre Orchestra, Chorus and Dancers. The producer was Pierre Audi. This was the team responsible for *Tamurlano*. The performing edition (of *Les Arts Florissants*) used Rameau's original scoring. The sound balance was, throughout, dominated by the woodwind, with particularly subtle writing for bassoons and hand horn. This provided a thrilling accompaniment to the drama.

Publicity had it that *Zoroastre* and Mozart's *Sarastro* are one and the same. Apart from the name and the connection with freemasonry there is no connection between the character depicted here and in *Die Zauberflöte*. The opera has a typical masonic theme - the battle of good and evil between the forces of the dark and the light. As with *Die Zauberflöte*, the plot is consequently full of inconsistencies and illogicalities. It examines the struggle between Zoroastre and his girlfriend Amélite ranged against the evil High Priest and sorcerer Abramane and the Princess Érinice. The latter invoke subterranean and dark forces against the spiritual elevation of Zoroastre aided by 'Spirits of the Elements' under the direction of Oromasès, 'the king of the Genii'. Despite the absence of surtitles, the plot was easy to follow since the goodies were dressed in white and the baddies in midnight blue with nobody in between.

Vocally the performance was superb. Anders Dahlin (substituting for Mark Padmore) as Zoroastre and Sine Bundgaard (Amélite) were perfectly matched against their evil counterparts, sung by Evgeniy Alexiev and Anna Maria Panzarella; the baritone of Gérard Théruel gave great authority to his role as Oromasès. There is no doubt that the baddies had the best music both vocally and in the dances. I single out the duet between Abramane and Érinice in act three, a quarrel played out (for some reason) as a drunken game of footsie - a humorous element that seemed somewhat misplaced. However the high-point of the opera is act four, an extended *danse macabre* for soloists, chorus and corps de ballet, making full use of the stage machinery and starting with a realistic thunder-storm (typical of this year's summer weather in Sweden), representing the final efforts of the powers of evil. By contrast, the short final act five was a complete anti-climax, bringing the opera not so much to a conventional happy ending as to an abrupt stop. An audience more responsive to individual scenes would have added to the authenticity of the evening; reverential but enthusiastic applause was restricted to the end of each part.

On the evidence of this production and those mentioned above, Rameau's *forte* is seen as writing in support of stage spectacle, unlike Handel who conveys the drama

almost entirely through the music. A difference between musical and opera perhaps?

Anonymous

Mozart: *Così fan Tutte*, The Anonymous Singers, Holywell Music Room, 6 November 2005.

At the time of writing we await the announcement of the new General Director to replace Anthony Freud, who is moving to Houston. Over the past eleven years he has done a tremendous job in maintaining the standards of WNO, in spite of some grossly misguided attempts to woo new audiences by promoting outrageously libidinous productions. We hope his successor will be able to attract directors whose productions succeed 'with the help of' and not in spite of their direction.

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One of the most outrageous of WNO's recent productions was a staging, a few years ago, of *Così fan Tutte*. This is an opera, which has suffered more than most from directors displaying their psychosexual hang-ups. Even in milder versions it has been seen on a cruise ship, on the beach, in Despina's Diner to name but a few. In the nineteenth century, the music was even given a new plot. Each new production seeks to wring out new emotional and psychological implications. It is surprising there has not yet been a neo-Darwinian interpretation - but maybe there has. One awaits with some apprehension the new production at Glyndebourne next year.

It is probably only in a production like that under review here that one can get a straight-forward telling of the story of the sisters Fiordiligi and Dorabella, whose boyfriends, to settle a bet with the 'elderly philosopher' Don Alphonso (aided by the maid Despina), assume disguise and attempt to woo the other's partner, with a predictable result. The deeper emotional implications of the situation are hinted at in the music. They do not need to be made explicit. This is a light-hearted *scuola degli amanti* (the opera's sub-title), the characters are not tragic heroes or heroines. The elderly philosopher on this occasion is an Emeritus Fellow of Merton, Christopher Watson, whose voice and presence still retain sufficient authority to command the action. (The Don Alphonso in Glyndebourne's 2006 production could have learnt a lot from Watson.) He is the organiser of The Anonymous Singers who were accompanied by The Exuberant Players comprising string quartet, wind and continuo (played by Diana Bickley, dividing her time between harpsichord and bass on opposite sides of the stage). The Singers are celebrating their thirtieth year of music-making for charity; this is their eleventh annual opera performance. Although new to me, they have an enthusiastic following in Oxford who packed the Holywell Music Room for this year's two performances.

It is tricky to describe the standard of performance. They make no claim to full professional polish, yet to call them amateur seems somehow politically incorrect. Perhaps 'non-professional performers' describes them best. Certainly the singing and the acting were of a uniformly high standard, betrayed by an occasional nervous tenseness in the large set-piece arias. Kipper Chipperfield as Dorabella and Hugo Tucker as Ferrando particularly impressed and Claire Evans excelled as Despina; but most thrilling were the sextet ensembles. The musical director was Chris Davey who provided a mainly supportive accompaniment though an occasional lapse in the strings gave the singers some anxious moments. There was some beautiful clarinet playing. An interesting device was the singing of the recitatives in English (totally intelligible in an excellent translation by Anne Ridler) and the arias in the original Italian. The stage management, making best use of the available space in the Music Room, was impeccable under the direction of Georgina Ferry.

We are informed that Christopher Watson is also a *Relate* counsellor. One wonders how many of his clients accept the advice *così fan tutte*.

Loose Ends

Handel: *Hercules*, Barbican Theatre, 17 March. Rameau: *Platée*, Palais Garnier, Paris, 7 May 2006.

In this final contribution of this Academic Year I will compare two works from the eighteenth century, by Handel and by Rameau..

The two baroque works (both first performed in 1745) are Handel's *Hercules* in a staged version seen at the Barbican Theatre on 17 March and Rameau's *Platée*, at the Palais Garnier, Paris, on 6 May. The productions were both in the hands of supreme interpreters of the period style, *Hercules* by William Christie and his Arts Florissants in a production directed by Luc Bondy and *Platée* by Mark Minkowski and *Les Musiciens du Louvre*, directed by Laurent Pelly. Both orchestras rolled out a glorious carpet of sound supporting the singers and the spectacle that could have gone on forever (though the one interval in *Hercules* could, for comfort, have come earlier in the proceedings).

A concert performance of *Hercules* was given in the Sheldonian Theatre by Harry Christophers' The Sixteen last year. It was therefore an opportunity (as with recent productions of *Theodora* and *Jephtha*) to assess the added value of the visual element to Handel's oratorios. (*Hercules* is described as a 'Music Drama', coming at the transition in his work from opera to oratorio. It is not clear whether it was ever intended to be performed on the stage.) *Hercules* is a tragedy. The story relates the homecoming of Hercules, accompanied by the captive Princess Iole, mourning her father, but provoking intense jealousy in his wife, Dejanira. She presents him with an impregnated cloak, intended to restore his affection. Instead it poisons him. A sub-

plot concerns the love for Iole of their son Hyllas. At the Barbican, the staging was fairly minimal, the stage littered with detritus of classical statuary, dominated by a large head; the costumes were quasi-modern. While holding the attention and adding something to the atmosphere, the staging left little lasting impression. What do remain in the mind are the vocal highlights and the singing, particularly of Joyce DiDonato as Dejanira and Hanna Bayadi as Iole. The latter sang from the orchestra pit, the part being mimed by the vocally indisposed Ingela Bohlin, but a remarkable performance.

In complete contrast, *Platée* is an outrageous comedy. Billed as a ‘*Comédie Lyrique (Ballet Boufon)*’, it is, in fact, a self-parody by Rameau of his own more familiar *tragédies lyriques*, in the *de rigueur* form of prologue and three acts. It relates the story of one of the lesser known of Jupiter’s amatory exploits and is based on Pausanias. The prologue sets the context of what follows as an enactment of an episode in which Jupiter sets out to cure Juno of jealousy – their relationship comes over as a baroque version of Wotan and Fricka. The three acts relate how an unattractive marsh-nymph, Platée, is set up to undergo a mock marriage with Jupiter. This ceremony is interrupted by Juno who gets the message, while Platée disappears back into her swamp with a splash. (The opera was most inappropriately written as part of celebrations of the marriage of the Dauphin to the ugly Spanish Princess Maria Teresa!)

The production was outstandingly ingenious and elaborate, fully worthy of Rameau’s musical invention. The curtain rose on a mirror image of the auditorium which gradually filled with the chorus as audience for the prologue, presented by various gods and muses. During the course of the opera the seating broke up to symbolise a rocky framework for the appearance of streams and grottoes representing the woodland surroundings of Platée’s habitat. The spectacle was as much ballet as opera with a chorus of frogs providing a commentary on the action, as did a cast of minor deities. The standard of performance was brilliant throughout, with Mireille Delunsch outstanding in the key role of La Folie. But the main credit goes to the Glaswegian *haut-contre* Paul Agnew in the title role. On stage for most of the three hours duration, he gave a vocal and dramatic performance that underpinned the whole production, winning our sympathy for the grotesque nymph he was portraying.

I have commented before that, unlike Handel, whose dramatic music can stand on its own as drama without a visual element, the spectacle is essential to Rameau. This has led me to regard Rameau as a composer of musicals rather than operas. On the evidence of *Platée* he comes over as an eighteenth century Andrew Lloyd Webber – a proposition which led to the suggestion that maybe in two hundred years’ time Lloyd Webber will be regarded as the Rameau of the twentieth century.

This was a first visit to the Paris Opéra, known these days as the Palais Garnier. Such is the grandeur of this edifice, with its curving staircases linking a complex of salons

on a multitude of levels, that the auditorium itself at first appears modest in size and intimate in atmosphere. It is hard to believe that it is the same size as Covent Garden (seating some 2200), with one of the largest of operatic stages. A somewhat incongruous but charming feature is the ceiling painting by Marc Chagall. The mellow acoustic and the comfort of the seating added greatly to our enjoyment, as did a chance meeting with a friend from Oxford in the interval. I should add that our pre-order for interval refreshments, noted down on a paper napkin, compared favourably with the procedure at the Royal Opera House, requiring two telephone calls and a fax days in advance.

Classical Operas Reviewed Elsewhere

For reference, other operas from this period can be found in other chapters

- *Dido and Aeneas* – **Dido Dissected**, Chapter 2
- *Iphigénie en Tauride* – **Agony and Ecstacy**, Chapter 3
- *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* – **The Return of Monteverdi**, Chapter 3
- *Le Nozze di Figaro* – **The Garden Path**, Chapter 4
 Riga Opera Festival, Chapter 4

Chapter 6 – Romantic Opera (19th – early 20th century)

The majority of the opera reviews of the romantic period contained in this book appear in other chapters as listed below. The reviews here are of Ellen Kent productions of her Opera International extolled in Chapter 2 under 'Liturgies'. The reader may wish to read the reviews of *La Bohème* and *Rigoletto* contained therein after the following.

Comfort Food

Puccini: *Tosca*, Chisinau National Opera, New Theatre, Oxford , 2 February, 2004

Before starting my review of this production I must confess to certain prejudices. *Tosca* is not my favourite opera. I once told a friend that I could not see how *Tosca* could be anyone's favourite opera. Ever since, she has regarded me as some kind of a monster. Indeed, I tend to the opinion that it is 'a shabby little shocker', which I had always believed was that of Sir Thomas Beecham until I checked recently in a dictionary of musical quotations which gives the source 'anon'.

Neither is Puccini my favourite opera composer. I find his music too episodic and lacking in continuity. The music seems to skate over the emotional surface of the underlying melodrama of his plots, acting as a vehicle for the occasional vocal highlight (excerpt) amid fragmentary dialogue. (I like to contrast Puccini (1858-1924) with Janáček (1854- 1928). Janáček's plot development is continuous and the music bites deep into the underlying drama). I would like to be able to continue 'and yet, I am always carried away by the beauty of the melody, by glorious singing and the depth of Puccini's dramatic insights'. Unfortunately, this is not often the case. This is not to say that I never enjoy productions of Puccini operas. I remember in my youth hearing Eva Turner sing *Turandot* at Covent Garden. This was an impressive production which nearly came to grief when the bearers holding her vast train as she mounted a staircase, towards the end, almost caused her to tumble backwards. Forty years later at a performance in Lyon, *Turandot* required reading glasses to pose the riddles! Among other Puccini operas, I can recall several good *Bohèmes*, a fairly memorable *Fanciulla del West* by WNO in 1991, a good *Suor Angelica*, a part of a *Trittico*, at the London Colliseum. *Madama Butterfly* remains a blind spot despite a persuasive sepia-tinted production, also by WNO some years ago. (I can never envisage how she got into such a predicament in the first place). *Tosca*, itself, some ten years ago, received a fascinating real time, in situ television production, spread over four transmissions in two days. It was last seen in an almost convincing production in Washington DC in 2000, with Oxford's own Sergei Lieferkus playing Scarpia. One shudders at accounts of recent productions.

So why did I choose to attend this performance of *Tosca* at the New Theatre? This production, presented by Ellen Kent and Opera International, offered 'spectacular

traditional sets and costumes, performed by Chisinau National Opera' of Moldavia. Perhaps it was nostalgia for a clean old-fashioned operatic production away from the damaging egocentricity of scatological Spaniards and puerile politically posturing Americans. The production is starting a tour of Britain and Ireland, with some sixty performances in forty theatres between now and July. This is an enormous test of stamina for cast and production staff, though three or four singers share the principal roles.

The plot is well known. The three acts may be encapsulated in three sentences. The opera singer, Floria Tosca, is the jealous mistress of the painter Cavaradossi, who conceals an escaped political prisoner, Andreotti. Tosca reveals the latter's whereabouts when her lover is tortured by order of Scarpia, Chief of Police, whom she then stabs after offering herself in exchange for a letter of safe conduct, to follow a mock execution. The execution is for real; Tosca ends her own life by leaping from the battlements of Castel Sant'Angelo.

One entered the auditorium to find the curtain raised on a realistic representation of the church of Sant'Andrea della Valle with sacristans setting the atmosphere by swinging censers and lighting candles. One was left to contemplate how comfortably realistic and solid the sets looked, compared to those of recent visits of other touring opera companies. The opening portentous brass chords from the orchestra set the mood but unfortunately soon revealed what was to be the main weakness of the performance, a bad lack of balance in the orchestral sound. There were far too few strings and the wind sound was too reedy. This being Puccini, it did not detract too much from one's enjoyment of the performance; he is not noted for the subtlety of his orchestration. For any other composer it could have been a disaster.

As usual, one awaited with bated breath the first notes of the tenor. Akhmed Agadi, singing Cavaradossi, did not disappoint. He had a strong, clear and accurate voice and gave a worthy performance of his first excerpt, '*recondita armonia*'. But his voice went from strength to strength; his rendering of '*e lucevan le stelle*' was superb. The Ukrainian, Larysa Malych, sang Tosca. She looked the part, had great stage presence and a wonderful voice. Her performance of Tosca's excerpt, '*vissi d'arte*' was one of the most tender and moving that I have ever heard. The trio of principals was completed with the Scarpia of Boris Materinco, who has been with the company since 1985. He gave a marvellous portrayal of evil within a suave exterior. The three voices were perfectly matched and one could almost say that the best singing was that of the exchanges between Tosca and Scarpia in Act II, and the final duet of soprano and tenor.

The director was Eugen Platon, who has also been with the company for many years. The direction was conventional, following the stage instructions closely. There were a few niggles: while Cavaradossi's torture left him with blood on his sleeve, Scarpia (stabbed in the stomach, rather than the heart) shed no blood at all. Perhaps with such a heavy schedule the company has no time for laundry! Worst of all, the

advertised stunt artist, doubling as Tosca, 'jumping from a great height to bring the performance to a truly blood-curdling finale' was a complete flop (in a manner of speaking)! The 'double' was obviously the wrong height and could not even handle Tosca's dress when taking a curtain call!

The Chisinau National Opera deserves to take its place as an equal with our other regular visitors, the Welsh National and Glyndebourne Touring (or could do if it would double the size of the string section of the orchestra). Admittedly, it is comfort food rather than nouvelle cuisine but both have their place in a balanced diet! It is not only the staging which has an old-fashioned aspect but the timbre of the singing also has a nostalgic air. The house was comfortably full but not the sell-out it deserved to be, the audience far more a cross-section than that for our other regular visitors. It gives the lie to the misguided opinion that to get 'bums on seats' it is necessary to become ever more outrageous and explicit. Why does Covent Garden not borrow productions such as this, rather than those of soi-disant avant-garde continental directors, which have passed their sell-by date?

As for Tosca, perhaps I can now see how it can be a favourite opera. However, I am unlikely, myself, to be converted. Of the two singers, I find Janáček's Emilia Marty by far the more fascinating character.

Eastern Promise

Verdi: *La Traviata*; Puccini: *Madama Butterfly*, The Ukrainian National Opera of Odessa, New Theatre, Oxford, 3, 4 February 2005.

Ellen Kent and her Opera International are doing a tremendous service to lovers of opera and ballet in this Country, by bringing over, on tour, Eastern European companies, presenting traditional productions of the popular repertoire. While followers of Welsh National Opera and Glyndebourne Touring have in the past been a little wary of such productions, the increasingly bizarre nature of some of their own recent efforts have led to a real thirst for 'proper productions'. Last year we saw the Chisinau National Opera in a brilliant *Tosca* and *Turandot* (sadly disappointing, mainly due to a lack of stage presence in the eponymous role, but mitigated by an outstanding Liu in Rosa Lee Thomas). This year it is the turn of the Ukrainians, who were seen in performances of *La Traviata* and *Madama Butterfly*.

What do these two operas have in common? Both are archetypal stories dealing with heroines tragic in their own way. One is a simple sentimental, if familiar, story of a naïve girl left pregnant by a visiting naval officer to the shores of Japan, bringing shame and disgrace to herself and her own family. The other is the complex story of a terminally ill courtesan, who sacrifices a chance of ending her days in happiness with a young lover in order to spare his family shame and disgrace. Both stories have captured the imagination of a wider public than the regular opera going audience.

Both have recently inspired musicals based loosely on their subjects - *Miss Saigon* (recently at the New Theatre and reviewed in these columns by my drama colleague, Keith Gore) and *Moulin Rouge* (seen recently on TV). Such transcriptions give rise to issues to which I shall return in future articles. But looked at in this way, one immediately sees that the basic fault with WNO's recent version of the latter, set in modern times, is that the music was wrong. The directors should have realised this.

In anticipating the rise of the curtain on *Traviata*, one was tempted to expect comparison with the Chisinau Opera - that is beautiful singing and action but rather tatty sets and a rather weak orchestral sound. This was not the case with the Ukrainians who came over as a much more professional company. The design of the set used the full space of the New Theatre stage (in contrast to WNO) and, while one might cavil at some of the detail of sets and costumes, the décor acted as a perfect backdrop to the action. The orchestra, a little tentative at first with wind and strings out of balance, improved remarkably as the opera progressed and provided a fine accompaniment, if not, if not, perhaps, making the strong positive contribution to the drama as do our Welsh friends.

Apart from these minor criticisms, it must be said that this production was absolutely outstanding and can stand comparison with any of our domestic opera companies, not excluding the Royal Opera. First and foremost one must say that all the details of the drama, carefully worked out by Verdi and Piave, in their adaptation of Dumas, came over as a fresh telling of the story (admittedly aided by the surtitles of David Edwards, courtesy of the Royal Opera). The singing, of both soloists (all of whom have extensive international experience) and chorus was marvellous. Alfredo, Akhmed Agadi from Kazakhstan, was a slightly foreign sounding tenor with a slight lisp who nevertheless sang truly and acted convincingly. Vladimir Dragos (Giorgio Germont) sang his dramatically difficult role with as much conviction as is possible (a sterner interpretation than Christopher Purves for WNO). Larysa Zuyenko (who has sung the role at the Bastille) was in full dramatic and vocal control of the title role with all its range of emotions and gave a completely satisfying performance.

It is hard to select highlights from such a rounded performance but I will mention three: the heart-breaking dialogue between Violetta and Germont in the scene in the country, the final chorus from Act II, where the orchestra came fully into its own - the musical climax of the opera - and Violetta's performance in the last Act. The emotional impact of this finale lay in the singer's technical ability to convey the frailty of the heroine without a diminution in the intensity or quality of the sound.

It was still savouring the experience of *La Traviata* that I set off the next evening to see *Madama Butterfly*.

I must confess that these two lie at opposite ends of my scale of great operas. The tragedy of *Butterfly* is her simple innocence and foolish self-deception; that of *Violetta* is her self-knowledge and complex motivation in going to live with Alfredo

and then leaving him on the demand of Germont. The music of the former is blown up by Puccini to almost Wagnerian length, relatively speaking. (I agree with the original La Scala audience in this.)

Having said this, this production was most persuasive, in its way the equal of *Traviata*, being borne along by a beautiful orchestral sound doing more than justice to Puccini. Again, it was characterised by a clear telling of the story without embellishment or embroidery. The scenery, with its backdrop of Nagasaki bay and small house set in a beautiful garden (Ellen Kent's own design) was a perfect setting for the drama which was performed to the highest vocal standard throughout. Rosa Lee Thomas (the Liu of *Turandot*) gave a moving portrait of Cio-Cio-San. Ruslan Zynevych gave a nicely judged portrait of Pinkerton's cynicism and deviousness with the slightest twinge of conscience at the end. However, I shall remember this production for Vladimir Dragos in his portrayal of the Consul. He got every nuance of the character right, from his initial cynicism, to his gradual growth of sympathy for Cio-Cio-San, combined with his exasperation with her self-deception and his desire to have nothing to do with the matter. My one slight criticism is that the ladies did not have to perfection the elegant poise and delicacy of movement, which is the image the western mind has of the Japanese, to emphasise the culture clash.

These were two remarkable nights at the opera. All the soloists are names worth looking out for. We look forward to the return of this company.

Romantic Operas Reviewed Elsewhere

Other operas of the romantic period can be found in the following chapters:

- *Ariadne auf Naxos* - **Agony and Ecstasy**, Chapter 3
- *Das Rheingold* – **Riga Opera Festival**, Chapter 5
- *Der Fliegende Holländer* – **No Fear of Flying**, Chapter 3
- *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* – **Sacred and Profane**, Chapter 4
- *Die Lustige Witwe* – **Tale of Two Cities**, Chapter 4
- *Die Schöne Helena* – **Tale of Two Cities**
- *Don Carlos* – **Dressing up**, Chapter 3
- *Eugene Onegin* – **Smoke and Gunshot** Chapter 3
- *Falstaff* – **Tale of two Cities**, Chapter 4 (twice)
- *Il Trovatore* – **Two Nights at the Opera**, Chapter 3
- *Jenufa* – **Tale of Two Cities**, Chapter 3
- *L'Elisir d'Amore* – **Bastille Days** Chapter 4
- *La Bohème* – **'Liturgies'**, Chapter 2
- *La Cenerentola* – **Reaching Out**, Chapter 2
- *La Traviata* – **Travesty**, Chapter 3
- *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* – **Riga Opera Festival**, Chapter 4
- *Les Troyens* – **Bastille Days**, Chapter 4
- *Mazepa* – **History Repeats**, Chapter 3

- *Queen of Spades* – **Riga Opera Festival**, Chapter 4
- *Parsifal* – **Two Nights at the Opera**, Chapter 3
- *Rigoletto* – ‘**Liturgies**’, Chapter 2

Chapter 7 – Modern Opera (1900 to now)

The modern operas reviewed herein form a real miscellany, from established twentieth century masterpieces (*Wozzeck*, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, *Erwartung*), through Walton's *The Bear* and Lennox Berkeley, *A Dinner Engagement*, to Britten, *Ceremony of Carols* and *Winter Words* to two new operas, *The Piano Tuner* by Nigel Osborne and, probably the first twentieth century setting of the Orpheus legend, by John Caldwell. And *Jerry Springer – The Opera*, which just qualifies for inclusion!

Streetwise Opera

Benjamin Britten: *Ceremony of Carols*, *Winter Words*, New College Chapel, November 28-29, 2003.

On two evenings at the end of November, Streetwise Opera presented a performance version of Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols* and *Winter Words*. This was such an unusual, heart-warming and unifying experience that it has to be recorded in these columns. Advance publicity in the national and local press and on radio 3 had already indicated that this was something special.

Streetwise Opera is the creation of Matthew Peacock, a musician who has been involved in opera in a number of ways (he was once Assistant Editor of *Opera Now* magazine). He now works with homeless people both here and in the USA, to involve them in workshops and in productions of this nature. A cast of New College choristers, established professional musicians, actors and singers from institutions, hostels and other homeless centres in the Oxford area and, may one humbly add, the audience joined in what one may describe as a peripatetic arrangement of these seasonal works of Benjamin Britten. A large back-up team was also involved in the complex stage-managing of the event.

The evening began with a standing audience crowded into the Ante-Chapel for the first half. Mute ushers expertly created passages in the crush to make way for the performers and continued to manoeuvre the assembly as the centre of action moved from place to place. *Winter Words*, interleaved with the carols, were sensitively sung by the tenor, Tom Raskin, and there was some wonderful harp playing by Alice Trentham. But they supplied only the lynchpins for the production, the main heroes of which were the amateur performers and the 'stage' hands. Musical direction was divided between Edward Higginbotham (Carols) and Dominic Harlan (Winter Words) who also accompanied on the piano.

For the second half, performers and audience processed into the chapel where the music was accompanied by a series of tableaux, in the nave and before the altar. The performance concluded with the assembled cast singing the finale in front of the brightly illuminated reredos, the choristers changed into street clothes.

The overall director was Kenneth Richardson. It was almost impossible to believe that he had created this production in twelve weeks of workshops, since September. The complex movement, the lighting and the furling and unfurling of banners were managed with fewer hitches than the standard opera production! What was so incredible was that the production did not so much bridge the gap between the professionals, choristers and those of completely different circumstances, as to remove it. One can understand how it caught the imagination of the media.

But the evening did not end with the performance. At the end we were ushered out into the cloisters, miraculously illuminated with thousands of candles, to mingle with the performers and the choristers, who served punch and Christmas cake. It was clear from chatting to them that, if the object of Streetwise Opera is to raise the confidence and self-esteem of the homeless, then this production was an outstanding success.

Lyre upon Lyre

John Caldwell: *The Story of Orpheus*, performed by New College Chamber Opera Studio, New College Chapel, 4-6 March, 2004.

A musical event of some considerable significance took place recently in New College Ante-Chapel. This was the first complete performance of a new chamber opera by the Oxford composer, John Caldwell, based on the myth of Orpheus and Euridice. It was performed by the New Chamber Opera Studio, directed by Michael Burden.

The story of Orpheus and Euridice has presented its challenge to many composers of opera: how to represent to an audience that the musicianship of the hero was such as, in the first place, to woo and win Euridice and then to overcome the conventions of the Underworld to allow her to return to earth after her untimely death (albeit, with conditions). It is a challenge that many composers have taken up, maybe or maybe not identifying themselves with the hero!

There is formidable competition. The greatest of all, the first great opera, which remains one of the greatest of all operas, is, of course, Monteverdi's 'favola in musica', *Orfeo*, of 1607. This, itself, is inspired by (or commissioned as a result of) two earlier settings of the story, under the title *Euridice*, by Peri (1600) and by Caccini (1602). However, the New Grove Dictionary of Opera lists over sixty versions: twenty in the 17th century, twenty-seven in the 18th, eight in the 19th and nine in the 20th. The work under review is probably the first of the 21st century! Of those listed, several are incomplete and several remain unperformed. Only one per century has stood the test of time: Monteverdi (1607), Gluck (1762), Offenbach (1858), Birtwistle (1986) though one should perhaps include Cocteau's 'honorary opera', the film *Orphée* (1949), fortuitously showing at the Phoenix Cinema, the week after

this premiere. (One is intrigued by a version Haydn wrote in London in 1791, whose production was aborted when George III refused a work permit to the director! It seems it was first performed in Florence in 1951, conducted by Kleiber, with the Danish tenor, Thyge Thygesen, and Maria Callas!)

For the inspiration for John Caldwell's setting, one has to go back to the 1480 verse play by Angelo Poliziano, which was also the basis for the libretto of a chamber opera by Casella (1932). This has the feature of being 'mythologically correct'. At the outset, Euridice is bitten by the snake on fleeing the unwanted attentions of Artimaeus, a son of Apollo (a detail often overlooked). On returning to earth, without Euridice, Orpheus is torn to pieces by Thracian women who were infuriated by his single-minded love for his wife and renunciation of others. His head and his lyre were flung into the river Hebrus and carried to Lesbos, where his head was caught in a fissure of rock and delivered oracles for some time thereafter. This is in contrast to the more usual endings where the protagonists are either reunited or eternally separated, at the whim of the composer. (In particular, Monteverdi has a typically male chauvinist denouement. *Orfeo* rises with Apollo to the heavens, from where he can gaze down everlastingly on his beloved; the question of whether she is able to gaze up at him is not addressed!)

This version of the legend is the first secular opera by the composer, following three religious works assembled into a trilogy on Christ's Last Supper, Crucifixion and Resurrection. The centrepiece of these, *Good Friday*, is particularly impressive and one looked forward to seeing how the complex texture and allusive style of his writing would adapt to the mythological theme. The answer is brilliantly!

The opera follows Poliziano's text closely. Although conceived to be sung in Italian, the performance was given in the composer's own English translation. For an anglophone audience, this was a good thing - thanks to the clarity of the writing and the enunciation of the singers, not a word was wasted; the facilities of the venue would not have permitted surtitles! The action falls into three parts: the first leading to the death of Euridice, the second, Orpheus' mourning, descent into the underworld and ultimate loss of Euridice and the third the vengeance of the Bacchantes. From the point of view of dramatic balance the first part was perhaps too long but this was handled well by the director who interpreted it in terms of a pastoral mummers' play. Aristaeus' four stanza canzona, praising the 'nymph' Euridice, with the haunting refrain 'Hear, O ye woodlands, my tearful complainings' was the first vocal highlight of the evening, sung beautifully by the tenor, William Rolls. Euridice (Kate Semmens) then appears, dressed not as a nymph but in a fur coat and sunglasses. (With Orpheus wearing a lounge suit, this was a discordant note, despite the Director's programme explanation that they occupied a 'real' world between the pastoral and the underworld. It is not clear to me that there is one!) Notwithstanding, Euridice sang her short aria of fidelity in characteristically and enchantingly nymph-like fashion.

The second part, in conception, composition and performance was what makes this version of the myth something special and the performance memorable. Following Orpheus' cheerful entry, singing to the tune of *Greensleeves*, he receives the news of Euridice's death in the form of a Bach-evangelist type recitative. He then embarks on thirteen stanzas of sublimely beautiful and varied music, interrupted by the action, describing first his grief, then his resolve to journey to Hades; following the appearance of Pluto and Proserpine, he makes his plea, regains and finally loses again Euridice, and, on return to earth, renounces the love of woman. It is a remarkable performance by the alto, Iestyn Davies, still a student at the Royal Academy. His singing was of the utmost clarity and expression, sustained throughout the long passages. Such was the musical performance that one could overlook weaknesses in the acting - the climax when he turns around was lacking in theatrical impact!

In the final section, the Bacchantes take over, first of all in a realistic dismemberment of Orpheus with his head being thrown from the Ante-Chapel into the Chapel itself, now representing the river Hebrus. This is followed by a Bacchanalian dance, with a hint of ragtime in the music, reminiscent of today's binge drinking.

Musically, the work bears the stamp of Caldwell's own established style of vocal writing, noted in his previous operas. Its main characteristics are a clear separation of the vocal line from the accompanying orchestration, as if the latter is commenting on the former and secondly by the ingenious instrumentation, giving a far fuller and richer sound than one might expect from the fourteen performers. As noted above, the music is allusive rather than derivative. (I do not presume to disclose my own hazarded guess on influences!) The quality of the music written for Orpheus stands comparison with Gluck, though, of course, the idiom is completely different. This version of the legend sets a high standard for the twenty-first century! I hope we may soon have the pleasure of hearing a recording of the work; the present cast and orchestra, under the baton of Stephen Rice, would be worthy performers.

Finally, I must record slight discomfort at the choice of venue. Having the New College Chapel represent, first, the Underworld and then the river leading to Lesbos strikes me as carrying interfaith tolerance a little too far!

Well-Tempered

Daniel Mason: *The Piano Tuner*, Picador, 2003. *The Piano Tuner*, (a new opera by Nigel Osborne and Amanda Holden): The Oxford Playhouse, 3 November 2004.

On the face of it, the novel, *The Piano Tuner*, by Daniel Mason is an unlikely subject for an opera, taking place mainly on various forms of transportation on a journey from London to the Shan States of Burma in 1886. The book tells the story of a piano

tuner, Edgar Drake, who is hired by the War Office to travel to Burma ostensibly to tune an Erard piano, the property of a charismatic Surgeon-Major Anthony Carroll. This peculiar mission is authorised on the grounds that the surgeon is playing an important politico-military role in maintaining peace in an area of east Burma where tensions, both national and international, are high. The novel is an easy read and holds the attention, despite its rather understated style, perhaps because of the evocative quality of the writing and the vaguely allegorical overtones. On the other hand, in parts it reads as if the author is laying out his knowledge of 'specialist subjects' for a quiz show - street life in Victorian London, the geography and history of the Shan States of Burma, the mechanics of Erard grand pianos. Book One of the novel is in the form of a travelogue recounting the journey to Burma. The account relates various portentous incidents, the relevance of which are never really resolved. Book Two tells of the events surrounding the tuning of the piano and the tuner's unwitting and unwilling involvement in political activity, leading to personal disaster. The main weakness of the novel is that the personality of the piano tuner does not develop under the influence of his exotic odyssey. Outside his professional activity, he remains a passive participant in the events that involve him right up to the end. He misses his wife and his one close encounter with Carroll's enigmatic mistress, Khin Myo, remains non-tactile.

The composer of the opera, Nigel Osborne, known in Oxford for performances of *The Electrification of the Soviet Union* (2002) and *Sarajevo* (1994), and the librettist, Amanda Holden, greatly esteemed for her opera translations, have done a remarkable job in distilling the three hundred and fifty pages of the novel into two hours on the operatic stage. Very little important detail is lost. Their solution in Act One is to present a series of set piece scenes from the journey, continuity being provided by the text of the letters that Drake writes to his wife with the music taking a more and more oriental flavour as the journey progresses. Particularly effective are the scene of the street puppet theatre in Mandalay and that in which the wife and Khin Myo provide a background duet, the former in western style, the latter in eastern. The beginning of the second act is concerned with the restoration of a real Erard piano, which is dismantled before our eyes, though the sounds of tuning are represented by the orchestra. I share the frustration of *The Times'* critic, Richard Morrison, that we never get to hear the piano. (Morrison's review of the opening of the opera at the Linbury Theatre is unsympathetic and insensitive. He overvalues the novel and underrates the opera.) The piano is again represented by orchestral sounds when Drake plays Bach to the assembled warlords. The composer has really missed a trick here, whatever his motives. The dramatic effect of the clear tones of a Bach fugue singing out over the jungle would have been overwhelming and support the composer's thesis of the healing power of all musical idioms. With such refreshment at the climax of the opera, what followed might not have seemed so long drawn out. In the novel the rafting of the piano downstream lacks credibility, its representation on the stage was not convincing. It could be abbreviated!

The opera was produced by Music Theatre Wales, directed by Michael McCarthy, their artistic director; the conductor was Michael Rafferty. Musically, it was intriguing and enjoyable to hear with its varying mixture of occidental and oriental styles. The staging (designed by Simon Banham) was ingenious and effective, the singing good but with acting of amateur dramatics standard. It was good to see that the opera had attracted a full house to the Playhouse, though there were some gaps after the interval. Those who see the opera may choose not to read the book; those who have enjoyed the book should go see the opera.

Paradise Lost

Jerry Springer - The Opera, BBC2 television film of stage production, Saturday, 8 January 2005.

In all the furore surrounding BBC Television's decision to transmit this film of *Jerry Springer - The Opera* in the face of vociferous complaints on grounds of blasphemy (in depicting Jesus Christ with homosexual leanings), of corruption of morals (in subjecting the viewer to an unremitting stream of foul language) or just of bad taste, I recall an event at Cambridge University in the fifties. Mark Boxer, as editor of *Granta* magazine, was rusticated for a term for publishing a poem on the lines above which was held to be blasphemous, or 'uncomplimentary to God' as the Senior Proctor, Derek Mack Smith put it. The matter became a *cause célèbre* and Boxer was paraded down King's Parade with full undergraduate honours on his departure. I mention this as it is an indication of how far attitudes have hardened in recent years with, on the one hand, religious zealots who threaten all sorts of intimidating retribution if they are offended in the slightest way but on the other hand those (not excluding some directors of opera) who, in the name of artistic freedom, feel they have the right to abandon all taboos without consideration of the sensibilities, beliefs or feelings of their likely audience or viewer.

As your reviewer, I must confess I did not do my homework. The transmission of *The Opera* was preceded by an hour-long documentary concerning Jerry Springer, who, most readers will by now know, runs a talk show in which participants reveal their secret misdemeanours and perversions to their partners, friends and colleagues. This documentary coincided with the last act of Radio 3's transmission, 'Live from the Met' of an outstanding performance of *Otello*, with a stupendous Ben Heppner in the title role and Barbara Frittoli as an unusually feisty Desdemona. I only caught the end of the documentary!

The theme of *Jerry Springer - The Opera* is one worthy of serious operatic treatment. The first act is a representation of a typical Springer TV reality show with three victims revealing themselves - a man disclosing to his fiancée the existence of two other lovers in his life, one with an infantile perversion who likes to dress up in a nappy, and a would-be pole-dancer confronted by her partner. At the end of this act

Springer is shot. Act II takes place in a purgatory presided over by the Devil, played by the warm-up man from the TV show. All the characters from the first half take on roles here - God, Jesus Christ, Adam and Eve, the Virgin Mary, in the manner of Judy Garland's real-world acquaintances becoming characters in the dream-world of *The Wizard of Oz*. It is a justifiable cause of outrage among committed Christians that the role of the loincloth-clad Christ, descending from the cross is played by the nappy-clad figure from Act I.

The Devil forces Springer to conduct a talk-show confrontation between himself and Christ, with interventions from the other characters - an appropriately Miltonic theme, as implied by the title of this piece. Unfortunately, there is no indication that either in aspiration or execution, the writers, Richard Thomas and Stewart Lee come anywhere near this level. The argument consists of little more than an exchange of obscenities with gratuitous sexual innuendo thrown in and makes no points of substance. The music is best described as pastiche recitative, with little attempt at aria, though there is an acceptable passage of contrapuntal choral singing at the end. The one redeeming feature is David Soul's brilliant performance as Jerry Springer, a speaking role which one forgets is an impersonation; a telling moment is his display of insecurity when deprived of cue cards.

I have given a brief review of *Jerry Springer - The Opera* as an opera and found it wanting. Of course, the television transmission has raised many other questions regarding freedom of expression, the legitimacy and limits of religious protest, whether or not the BBC should have permitted it. I will not be drawn into this discussion. There are many better trained than I in the rhetoric of such confrontations. I will only mention, as particularly silly, the remarks of one libertarian critic in attempting patronisingly to explain to devout Christians why they should not be outraged. If this was not a main purpose of the opera, what was? Images of outraged Christians burning their TV licences outside the BBC studios came over as a continuation of the opera as a significant comment on it. For my own part, I found the programme rather unsettling, not for religious or aesthetic reasons but for the realisation that there are people for whom reality TV *is* reality and for whom communication consists of the exchange of four-letter words. Though we were given adequate advance warning of the content and the language of the programme, I was surprised not to find at the end the familiar rubric: If you are disturbed by any of the issues raised in this programme and would like to speak to someone about it, you may call the following number...

Opera Anyway

William Walton: *The Bear*; Lennox Berkeley: *A Dinner Engagement*, Opera Anywhere, Jacqueline Du Pré Music Building, 30 April 2005.

The name of the small opera company, *Opera Anywhere*, based on the village of Sunningwell, tucked away between north Abingdon and Boar's Hill might be regarded as somewhat pretentious in view of the worldwide explosion of operatic activity in its many forms in recent years. In fact, 'Anywhere' refers to various unconventional venues where the company performs, mainly in the Oxfordshire area. Its admirable aim is to engage the local communities into an interest in opera and includes performances at corporate and private events. Founded some five years ago by Mike and Vanessa Woodward, its productions have included *Carry on Gilbert and Sullivan*, a Puccini double bill and *Last Night of the Viruses*, devised for a corporate business sponsor, the Sophos Anti-Virus Company of Abingdon. The production under review is their first 'straight' performance of mid-twentieth century opera and it is a tribute to their growing reputation that they were able to attract audiences to this ambitious enterprise. This was helped by their achievement of wide publicity in the local media as well as on Radio 3, including a performance at Oxford Railway Station. Your reviewer learnt of it from the JdP term programme where two performances were given at the end of two week's tour of local towns and village halls.

The double bill comprised two British operas, *The Bear* by William Walton followed by *A Dinner Engagement* by Lennox Berkeley. Both were first performed at Aldeburgh, the former in 1967, the latter in 1954; both the librettos are by Paul Dehn. It was a rare opportunity to see these minor masterpieces, albeit on a makeshift operatic stage. Given the limitations of the staging, these were, in every other way, totally professional performances. One's main regret, in viewing this as opera, was that the performances were accompanied on the piano, rather than instrumentally. However, as a musical experience, the virtuoso playing of the musical director, Peter Cowdrey, was utterly remarkable, holding the performance together throughout (in spite of having to depend on the stage lighting which often dimmed).

The Bear, based on a one-act piece by Chekhov, tells of a Mme Popova, mourning a husband, whose boorish creditor, Smirnov, arrives to demand money. While preparing to fight a duel over the matter, they fall in love. That's it! But the whole story is acted out with great wit, with the mediation of the third character, the arthritic servant, Luka. Luka, played by Oliver Hunt, almost stole the show, with his contorted movements and his sardonic comments on the behaviour of the principals, played by Vanessa Woodward and David Stuart. But the characterisation of all three was totally convincing.

While the story of *The Bear* is timeless, that of *A Dinner Engagement* is of its period, reflecting the beginning of the decline of class attitudes and social structure in the fifties. This made the latter very much a period piece. Set in a suburban kitchen, it tells of Lord and Lady Dunmow, impoverished ex-diplomats, who are preparing to entertain to dinner a Grand Duchess and her son, with a view to marrying off their uncooperative daughter. Needless to say, it ends happily. The music reflects perfectly the social status of each character.

The stage design by Mike Wareham was superb, nostalgic of the fifties' kitchen furniture and utensils. Within this setting, the acting was brilliant, the characters playing off each other to perfection with impeccable timing. All were good, but my favourite was Claire Stoneman as the hired help for the evening, particularly for her manic activity with a chopping knife! The libretto was published in the programme, completely unnecessarily since every word was clear from beginning to end.

Opera Anywhere is clearly a company to look out for, widening the range of operatic experiences available to us in Oxford. This summer they are putting on a Sunningwell Festival from 2-16 July, having failed to receive support from the uninspiring 'Oxford Inspires' organisation which is co-ordinating a programme of events under the title *Evolving City*. (*Oxford Inspires* was set up to mastermind the recent misconceived bid for the City and County to become Cultural Capital of Europe in 2008. In particular, nothing came of the need for the provision of a large auditorium for Oxford, to serve as a concert hall, conference centre and for other cultural, artistic and social purposes. This was identified during the insemination stage by all the diverse focus groups and think tanks as a top priority. It should have been appreciated that, if this was not a sustainable enterprise, Oxford could have no claim to be a Capital of Culture.) Sunningwell, with its own School of Art, has evolved into quite a cultural centre of its own, including a 'Proms on the Pond' event. Forty years ago the said pond in the centre of the village had the memorable sign: 'Bathing is not permitted - Paddling is permitted'. It was never clear whether this was enforced. But now Proms are permitted!

Specimen

Alban Berg, *Wozzeck*, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, 27 February 2006.

Keith Warner's 2002 production of *Wozzeck*, revived at the Royal Opera House during March, was the winner of the Lawrence Olivier Award for The Best New Opera Production in that year. On the evidence of this revival, the award was well merited. However, it now has to stand comparison with the Welsh National Opera's production of 2005, directed by Richard Jones ('Uncanny', Chapter 3). Musically this was an operatic experience of a lifetime, with Vladimir Jurowski giving an inspired interpretation of the score, which, with the playing of the WNO orchestra, left the audience shattered. Good though the performance was on this occasion, Daniel Harding and the ROH orchestra came nowhere near this impact, particularly the crashing chords at the climax of the opera. I also found Christopher Purves a much more sensitive interpreter of the title role than Johan Reuter on this occasion. Purves gave a superbly graduated portrayal of Wozzeck's degeneration from simple-mindedness to dementia than did the more homogeneous portrayal by Reuter.

Apart from this comparison, the productions can be considered independently. Jones, quirkily but effectively, transferred the action from the military environment of the original to the production line of a bean-canning factory. Warner's version keeps the environment, though it was not entirely clear that Wozzeck remained a soldier. On this occasion there was not a can of beans in sight, despite the Pythagorean diet for which Wozzeck was a guinea pig for a demented doctor. The opera was set as an expressionist nightmare, within the walls of a white-tiled box (representative of an asylum?). Apart from Marie's bedroom which occupied a corner of the stage, (serving also as the venue of the dance scene), other scenes were represented symbolically by reference to various large specimen tanks and changes of backdrop. The opera, in fifteen scenes, depicts Wozzeck's decline through humiliations by his captain (strangely depicted here as a cripple), the doctor, his partner, Marie, and her virile lover, the Drum Major until he finally snaps, cuts Marie's throat and drowns himself. Within its terms, this staging worked well, though it is a problem with this opera, that, with its vivid, powerful, score, it demands vivid visual imagery contrasting the fifteen scenes, particularly the key second scene in open country where Wozzeck begins to hallucinate. This is not easy to achieve!

The singing and acting was good, some of it very good. I single out, apart from Reuter, Susan Bullock, whose Wagnerian timbre suited well the part of Marie and Jorma Silvasti as the Drum Major (though in his scene with Marie when she succumbs to his advances, she seems somehow the wrong way round for a first encounter – but maybe I am too naïve, old-fashioned or puritanical). Particularly fine was the final duet between Wozzeck and Marie before she bleeds to death in a tank of water in which he then drowns himself in a foetal position (a clever piece of staging).

Finally, credit must be given to nine-year old Remi Manzi who played the six-year old Child. Not only was he on stage minutes before curtain up and continuously throughout, but he had to endure an additional ten minutes due to a late start! I guess he was symbolising the young Buchner, on whose play the opera is based, having been impressed by this true story at an early age.

Double Bill

Bartók: *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*; Schoenberg: *Erwartung*, Royal Opera House, 26 May, 2006.

The double bill of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* and *Erwartung* presents an interesting pair of almost contemporaneous operas. The former was written in 1911, the latter in 1909 but they were not performed until 1918 and 1924 respectively. This production, first seen in 2002, directed by Willy Decker, is revived here by Martin Gregor Lütje, designed by John Macfarlane and superbly conducted by Kirill

Patrenko. Both operas deal with the misfortunes of post-Wagnerian, post-redemptional heroines, though Judit, as Bluebeard's new wife, is not without redemptive aspirations. Having left her parents and her betrothed, she arrives at Bluebeard's bachelor establishment and immediately starts to moan about the damp and the gloomy atmosphere. Through a mixture of nagging and cajolery, she gains the keys to seven doors, each of which illuminates a blood-stained aspect of Bluebeard's existence, culminating in the revelation of his three previous wives, whose company Judit is drawn into. In this version of the fairytale it is Bluebeard who gains our sympathy. Judit, by neglecting his warnings, gets what she deserves, while Bluebeard is left at the end in need of both a new companion and a new hobby – his collection of wives representing times of the day, dawn, noon, dusk and night now being complete.

This is very dark staging in which the illumination, from each door in turn, is white changing to red. This is a different visual concept from each room producing a new colour adding to increasing total illumination, as is specified in the original stage directions. (The 1970's Sadler's Wells production which handled this perfectly remains vivid in the mind.) Musically the performance is stunning. Petra Lang and Albert Dohmen are totally engrossing and subtly represent the changing relationship between the characters, he with love turning to exasperation, she, her desire to know him turning to obsession.

The impact of *Erwartung* was diminished by a spurious and distracting attempt to link the two operas by using the same set and the same costumes for the Woman and her lover as for Judit and the Duke. Musically the operas are incompatible. *Bluebeard* is a neo-romantic telling of a fairy story, *Erwartung* is an atonally disorienting expressionist nightmare. It has the form of a monologue by a woman compulsively searching in the dark for a lover whom she suspects of infidelity. The ending is ambiguous when she encounters an object on the ground that could or could not be the dead body of the lover. In this production, the Woman, intensely portrayed by Angela Denoke, is closely shadowed by a bulky apparition, whom at the end she appears to run through with a sword. My own interpretation (which may not be original and which I only quote because it illustrates the disturbing questions thrown up by the work) is that she has previously murdered her lover and is now searching for him in an amnesiac state. One could envisage the score as providing an accompaniment to an expressionist, nineteen twenties', silent movie representation.

Chapter 8 – Further Reading

This final chapter is devoted to the review of four books. They are included for the following reasons. First, to bring them to the attention of the reader: they are all worth reading, though Scruton is not easy. Secondly, because I found them instructive and informative and helpful in clarifying my own views on Mozart, Wagner and *Tosca*, views which are incorporated in the reviews.

Mozartiana

David Cairns: *Mozart and his Operas*, Penguin, Allen Lane, 2006; Jane Glover: *Mozart's Women*, Macmillan, 2005.

The two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is being celebrated worldwide in many ways. The personal highlight so far is undoubtedly the new production of *Le Nozze di Figaro* at the Royal Opera House ('The Garden Path', Chapter 4). followed by its BBC2 transmission on 1 April. This confirmed the exceptional quality of David McVicar's direction and the performers. Among other delights have been the complete piano concertos broadcast on BBC Radio 3 from the Manchester 2006 Piano Festival on seven consecutive nights by a variety of pianists, some young in years, others still young in spirit, in a scintillating sequence of performances and, on a different level, a Sunday morning Oxford Coffee Concert in which Rachel Podger, *inter alia* Professor of Baroque Violin at The Guildhall School of Music, partnered by Gary Cooper on the fortepiano, gave a history lesson on the Violin Sonatas by playing five of them from different stages of his career plus a set of variations. Persuasive though their advocacy is for the fortepiano, which suits the early keyboard works, one cannot help but feel that Mozart himself must have welcomed the advent of the pianoforte. Not least among the celebratory offerings are two books – David Cairns on 'Mozart and his Operas' and Jane Glover on 'Mozart's Women' – both recently published, the former this year. Cairns shared a platform with Sir Colin Davis to talk on the subject of his book at the Oxford Literary Festival on 26 March.

David Cairns is probably best known to the reading public for his translation of the autobiography of Hector Berlioz and the subsequent award winning biography of that composer but his Mozart credentials are also impeccable. A co-founder of the Chelsea Opera Group, he was their first Leporello in their first production, of *Don Giovanni*, in the Holywell Music Room before its current restoration. The Group, still performing, gave concert performances in Oxford, Cambridge and London, mainly Mozart (though there was also a memorable *Falstaff*), and was a launch pad of Colin Davis' career. Cairns' introduces his new book on the Operas in his Preface: 'Another book on Mozart and his operas may not be needed. I can only say that I needed to write it -'. This admitted self-indulgence is apparent in the book's form and content. The work is addressed 'not to scholars but to musicians and amateurs' (*sic*).

It assumes the reader is already familiar not only with the operas and the rest of Mozart's output but also with the *dramatis personae* of his life. Thus a detailed knowledge of the opera plots and musical structure is taken for granted. The book is analytic not descriptive. This makes it a challenging but stimulating read for the 'amateur'. One is carried along by the author's enthusiasm even if it is sometimes difficult to follow a logical order to the presentation or to see the wood for the trees. The text is an erudite mixture of biography, musical history and a detailed analysis of Mozart's major operas from *Idomeneo* to *La Clemenza di Tito* with a brief mention of the earlier works. A chapter on each of these operas sets them in the context and circumstances of their composition before giving detailed analyses of the characters and the music.

Jane Glover's book is a complete contrast and is complementary to Cairns'. Of the three main parts, 'Mozart's Family', 'Mozart's Other Family' (his in-laws), 'Mozart's Women', the first two give a narrative account of Mozart's life, based almost exclusively on the extensive correspondence between the composer, his father, sister, wife and others. (A cursory reading of both books gives the impression that Mozart's main output consisted of operas, piano concertos and letters!) This well-trodden ground allows an almost day-by-day reconstruction of his family life. By concentrating on the life, Glover has produced an exceptionally readable no-nonsense picture of a normal, if much travelled, eighteenth century family, with everyday problems of money, health and personal relationships. It just happens that the daughter was an extremely talented performer and the son one of the greatest of creative geniuses. For example, the author writes (p25), commenting on one of the trials of prodigality in Paris— 'none of it, in fact, would be much of a problem for a technically gifted child with perfect pitch and a pushy parent'. The time spent composing his series of masterpieces is hardly mentioned other than in passing. This impression is redressed in the third part of the book, which is devoted to the operas and the constellation of brilliant singers, mainly young and mainly female, for whom the operatic roles were created. 'Women' encompasses both the singers and the operatic characters. There are good succinct summaries of the plots. A final section devoted to 'After Mozart' is a fascinating account of his survivors, mainly his sister and his wife's family, the Weber sisters. It lays to rest the calumnies contained in Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*.

The genius of Mozart and the universal effect of his music on all listeners, from the autistic to the sophisticate, are incontrovertible, but his genius is not unbounded. In an extraordinary sentence in his Preface (p2), Cairns states 'Mozart is the dramatic musician nearest to Shakespeare, in achievement, in the accident of living at the ideal historical moment, and in the nature of his art:...'. Overstatement of this nature does his subject no service. What about Verdi, what about Handel and, with respect, what about Berlioz? Where in Mozart's work are the equivalent of the Histories, of Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth? If you seek a literary analogue, Jane Austen is the name that comes to mind (a comparison made by implication but not explicitly in Cairns). Mozart's music is characterised by exquisiteness and delicacy, with iron in its soul.

That is its appeal but it is also its limitation. Thus, it cannot be expected to stand up so well to the round the clock exposure which BBC Radio 3 has given recently to Bach and to Beethoven. If one had to decide, for one's desert island, between the piano concertos of Mozart and those of Beethoven, the choice is far from easy.

Nevertheless, Matthew Arnold's words addressed to Shakespeare apply equally to Mozart in his own sphere: 'Others abide our question. Thou art free. We ask and ask: Thou smilest and are still, out-topping knowledge.' But this is all they have in common.

So what do we learn from these anniversary contributions to the literature on Mozart? I summarise briefly a few insights stimulated by reading them. The early operas, Cairns analyses as steps on the road to the emergence of Mozart's mature style. Glover sees them rather as providing tailor-made roles for the bevy of young sopranos he encountered Cherubino-like on his early travels. *Idomeneo* continues to gain in stature after almost complete neglect until a few decades ago and now stands alone as the pinnacle of *opera seria*. Cairns regards it now almost as Mozart's greatest opera after *Don Giovanni*, a verdict with which I cannot, however, agree. *Le Nozze di Figaro* must remain the near perfect example of the operatic art, for the music, the humanity of the entire cast of characters, the subtlety of the plot. I must thank Cairns for removing my reservations about the last Act, which I now see as a magical and transcendental coda, recapitulating the relationships previously developed, adding only the final bittersweet and ambiguous reconciliation of the Count and Countess. The ladies in *Figaro* are real human beings; those in *Don Giovanni* are types. It is intriguing that Ms Glover identifies Zerlina as the most important of them. This recalled youthful days when one used to pose the question: with which of the characters do you identify most closely? Invariably the lady's choice was the least expected. (The men graduated from the Don to Leporello; there were never any takers for Don Ottavio!) Dorabella and Fiordiligi are real people, but their predicament requires suspension of disbelief. The plot of *Cosí fan Tutte* is on two levels. It is either a cynical commentary of the inconstancy of all women or it is a tale of the emotional awakening of two spoilt, frivolous young sisters. Glover emphasises the real anguish of the two girls. A similar two level interpretation, superficial and profound, is found in other operas (not to mention much of Mozart's other music), notably *Figaro* (domestic comedy *versus* serious social commentary) and *Die Zauberflöte* (pantomime *versus* Masonic solemnity). It is this conflict that gives the operas their eternal fascination in performance. The director's art is to strike a balance between the two elements. Here, Cairns could become an essential guide. Glover should have a wider appeal, commended to all those who believe their appreciation of Mozart's music might be enhanced by knowledge of his life and times.

Mystification

Roger Scruton: *Death-Devoted Heart* (Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*). Oxford University Press, 2004.

I was once standing in a queue at the Phoenix cinema to see a film that formed part of a Film Studies programme. I overheard a student behind me explaining to his companion that Film Studies was a serious academic discipline just as valid as literature studies, drama studies, language studies and so on. 'It can be very theoretical' he said and, after a brief pause, 'of course, I am not doing the theory, it is much too difficult.' I feel very much the same way, in regard to Opera Studies, particularly when confronted by books such as that under review here. I should explain that I describe myself as an informed opera lover; I have never conducted opera, sung in it, designed it or directed it. (When discussing opera, it is necessary to state on which side of the footlights one stands. The late Sir William Mitchell was once heard to say that his preferred way to leave this world would be at Covent Garden during the second act of *Tristan*. 'On the stage?' someone asked. Alas, it was not to be.)

There are two great isolated peaks in the operatic repertoire, representing personal statements of their creators. One is *Fidelio*, Beethoven's great hymn to humanity and freedom. The other is Wagner's celebration of the all-consuming driving force of passion, *Tristan und Isolde*. The former is honest, open and straightforward, the depth of the musical inspiration overriding the alleged banality of the dialogue. The latter, below the surface of the music, is a complex metaphysical exercise with layer upon layer of meaning and ambiguity. And yet, in the theatre, both can be equally valid as deep emotional experiences. The question one has to address, in respect of Wagner, is how far does one need to probe in order fully to appreciate the subtleties of his drama. How necessary is theory? This is the question which poses itself on approaching the new book by Roger Scruton. Ernest Newman (of whom more below) puts it succinctly:

I venture to lay it down, then, that a clear picture of Wagner's mind processes during the conception and realisation of a work of art is to be obtained only by following him step by step through the literature ancient and modern, out of which it grew. It may be objected that a work of art should be its own sufficient explanation. But there are cases ... in which that simple proposition obviously does not hold good.

For me, what makes *Tristan und Isolde* unique is that it does not need singers. The orchestral music has such a well-constructed, rich symphonic structure that one can envisage hearing the orchestra on its own as a mammoth work of three inter-related movements - a Wagnerian analogue of Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*, perhaps. The voices, of course, add a new, glorious, musical dimension, expressing verbally the emotions of the protagonists and relating the events that have led to their

predicament. But, knowing the story (as with Berlioz) enables one to appreciate the drama from the orchestra alone. This is not entirely at odds with the thesis adopted by Roger Scruton, who, in chapter four, analyses in considerable detail the structure and progression of the musical ideas and their relation to the drama. I found this an interesting exercise but, without being competent to comment on it critically, all I can say is that it could be of value to practising musicians and to students of composition.

This book, is entitled in full, '*Death-Devoted Heart*, sex and the sacred in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*'. The first four chapters are concerned with the content of the opera. Three chapters, entitled *The Philosophy of Love, Tragedy and Sacrifice* and *Love, Death: and Redemption*, are devoted to a train of philosophical speculation triggered by the author's experience of the opera and there is an Epilogue.

Right at the beginning (p6) we have the statement:

Tristan und Isolde - arguably Wagner's most perfect work of art and the one that has the greatest claim to occupy the psychic space traditionally reserved for religion -...

One deplores the use of the word 'arguably' and the ambiguity - is 'arguably' intended to apply to both statements? The adverb implies there is some sort of checklist against which one may measure Wagner's output. Clearly, *Die Meistersinger* is a contender for the former title and *Parsifal* for the latter so maybe *Tristan* wins on average.

There is the air of a 'Banquo's ghost' about the first half of the book. Missing from the feast, is any significant acknowledgement of the great British Wagnerian, Ernest Newman, and his masterful, comprehensive and, above all, readable treatise on the operas, *Wagner Nights*, first published in 1949. I shall refer to the paperback edition of *Wagner Nights* (Pan Books, 1977.) It seems highly disingenuous of Roger Scruton not to recognise this book in at least the Preface to *Death-Devoted Heart*. Even if he did not use *Wagner Nights* as a direct source in writing his book (and it is interesting to compare word by word the descriptions of the Tristan legend in Scruton (pp22-29) and Newman (pp 185-194)), it is hard to believe that someone of his generation developing an interest in Wagner did not at some time immerse himself in its contents. If he was an exception, that, in itself, is worthy of comment.

Chapter three, *Wagner's Treatment of the Story*, mixes a detailed outline of the action and the story-telling, drawing attention to the symbolism contained in it. This is interleaved with a description of the thematic material copiously illuminated with musical quotations. (A useful Appendix lists the 46 'motives' out of which the score is constructed.) However, the chapter covers the same ground and in much the same fashion as does Newman and adds little in the way of new insights. In fact,

there is not a great deal that is not found these days in the more sophisticated programme notes or in booklets accompanying recordings.

The most interesting chapter in the book is the essay on *The Philosophy of Love*, in which the author examines, through a series of dichotomies the nature of one-to-one relationships. However, the chapter has two handicaps, imposed by the limitations implied by the book's title.

The first of these is the restriction, almost entirely, to the context of Wagner's opera. For example, in the comparison of eroticism within marriage to the extra frisson of forbidden fruit in illicit relationships, what better way to illustrate this than by comparison of the second act of *Tristan* with the great (and much briefer) duet, *O namenlose Freude*, from the above-mentioned *Fidelio*. The latter has an erotic charge almost as great as that of Wagner, depicting, as it does, the sudden re-awakening of Florestan's libido after his long incarceration. Indeed, one could encourage Roger Scruton to produce an 'illustrated' version of his philosophy of love, that is, 'illustrated' by examples from other operas which have the relationship between one woman and one man as the key theme: Monteverdi's Poppea and Nerone, Gluck's Euridice and Orpheus, Mozart's Pamina and Tamino, Massenet's Charlotte and Werther, Verdi's Violetta and Alfredo, Tchaikowski's Tatyana and Onegin, Puccini's Mimi and Rudolfo, Strauss' Salome and Jokanaan, Birtwistle's Pearl and Kong. Each of these portrays a quite different aspect of love. (Incidentally, *Donna Anna and Don Giovanni* is a better illustration of the Alcmene/Amphitryon paradigm than Britten's *Lucretia* (p138).)

The second handicap is the restriction to Wagner's version of the legend, expunging all reference to the other Isolde - 'of the white hands' or 'of Brittany', according to source. According to legend, Tristan was expelled, uninjured, from the court of King Marke and settled in Brittany where he fathered three children with this other Isolde before returning to Cornwall and sustaining his mortal injury. He then summons Isolde 'of Ireland' to Brittany to effect his cure. She arrives too late, due to his spouse reporting a black sail instead of the white one signalling her presence on board. (A good modern source is the three-part poem by Mathew Arnold, *Tristram and Iseult*, written about the time of Wagner's opera, alas, out of print now since OUP gave up 'doing' poetry.) Clearly, the existence of the second Isolde was an embarrassment to Wagner's theories that he was unable to handle (despite his personal life at the time). It prevents the author from including in the discussion of his philosophy of love any detailed discussion of the existence of a third person emotionally involved in a relationship (*pace* Princess Diana).

The two chapters preceding the Epilogue, which touches on Wagner's influence on succeeding generations of writers and musicians, are not easy to comprehend for someone who is not a professional philosopher. However they repay study. Wagner's own writings are not that transparent! As Ernest Newman says, in

commenting on a letter Wagner wrote in 1860: 'It is to be hoped that all this was clearer to Frau Wesendonck than it is to us'.

Chapters six, *Tragedy and Sacrifice*, and seven, *Love, death and redemption*, both take a very broad brush to their respective subjects, and, for the most part, could stand on their own, without specific reference to Wagner, in general, or *Tristan* in particular. In chapter six, the author explores the nature of tragedy and its relation to sacrifice and the sacred in its classical and more recent forms. It is not without difficulty that he successfully fits Wagner's imaginative creations into the general mould! It is the same in chapter seven, where the task is to understand what Wagner, himself, meant by redemption and its application in *Tristan und Isolde*. I think he succeeds; he analyses expertly the originality of Wagner's thought processes. However, there are occasional passages where mixing theory and application leads to apparent absurdity. I pick one particular instance (p183):

Death is withheld at the end of *Tristan*'s first act not merely for the drama's sake but for a deep religious reason.

If death is not withheld, *Tristan und Isolde* becomes a one-act opera - period; religion has nothing to do with it. (The anthropic principle in action!) It could be that the second act is meant but I would still not believe that religion rather than drama was uppermost in the composer's mind!

Interesting though it is, I am not convinced that such depth of study is necessary to appreciate the music drama. I believe in demystifying Wagner rather than the opposite. At the end of chapter one, the author admits that his interpretation is far from being the only cogent one. Scruton rightly dismisses Nietzsche's view, as quoted on p9, that Wagner's characters should be translated 'into the reality, into the modern - let us be even crueler - into the bourgeois'. In modern terms this would mean, for example, exaggerating the soap opera characteristics of *The Ring* (the unredeemed Siegfried as the tearaway product of a one parent foster home, for example). Productions of Wagner's music dramas on this limited view are completely unacceptable. (Nietzsche, after all, came to prefer Offenbach to Wagner.) My own view (which I hope the author will find 'cogent') is that Wagner's philosophy and theorising form scaffolding within which he constructs his music dramas but which can be removed once the edifice is complete. This enables one to enjoy his operas on all their many levels, from the lowest (Nietzsche) to the highest (Scruton). On this view, what Scruton has attempted to do in respect of *Tristan and Isolde* is to reconstruct the scaffolding. This is in no way to devalue this book as an important contribution to Wagner studies and, more generally, as a study of the role of sex and the sacred in philosophy.

I conclude with a quotation recorded by Camille Saint-Saens in 1903, giving Richard Wagner the last word:

When I re-read my theoretical works, I can no longer understand them.

Fact and Fiction

Nicassio, Susan Vandiver. *Tosca's Rome: The Play and the Opera in Historical Perspective, with a new Appendix*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999/2001.

This book has its inspiration in the author's passionate devotion to Puccini's opera *Tosca*. The opera, in turn, was inspired by the 1887 play by the French dramatist Victorien Sardou entitled *La Tosca* (distinguished from the opera here, as in the book, by the definite article). The play is based by Sardou on a fictionalisation of his interpretation of events in Rome in the years 1798-1800. *Tosca's Rome* thus completes the circle by placing the opera in the context of the political, social and cultural background of its period.

As implied by its title, *Tosca's Rome* has two inter-related themes. The first of these is the opera itself, the second the historical setting of Rome at the end of the seventeenth century. Thus, of the two introductory chapters, Chapter 1 is devoted to the story of the opera's creation, from its roots in Sardou's inspiration, followed by Puccini's obsession with the story after first viewing *La Tosca* in Milan in 1889, up to its opening in Rome in 1900. The chapter includes much detail about the political and religious situation in Italy during the writing of the opera and the influence of this on the composer. On the other hand, Chapter 2, *Rome without a Pope*, paints a detailed picture of life in Rome in the last years of the eighteenth century. There follow three chapters devoted to 'The Painter's Rome', 'The Singer's Rome' and 'The Policeman's Rome', reflecting the backgrounds of the three principal protagonists of the opera - Cavaradossi, Tosca and Scarpia, respectively. A major part of the book (100 pages) consists of four chapters dealing with the three acts of the opera, with an 'Entr'acte' after Act One. There are three Appendices relating to the writing of the opera: Appendix I compares in detail the actions of opera and play, the latter covering a longer period of time, while Appendix II discusses briefly the making of the libretto. Appendix III, new to the paperback edition, is entitled *1896 Working Papers for Tosca*. It gives an account of papers that have been found recently at Colleretto which throw new light on the creation of the opera, including discarded material.

In his distillation of *La Tosca* for the operatic stage, Puccini and his collaborators condensed the action to a sixteen-hour period between midday on 17 June and 4 a.m. on 18 June 1800. The date is fixed by reference to the battle of Marengo, reports of which (first the premature announcement of an Austrian alliance victory followed by news of Napoleon's late rally) reached Rome at that time. While there is no suggestion that the plot is other than fiction, there is no doubt that it is a plausible invention written with a high degree of realism. The frontispiece gives a map of the northwest quarter of Rome showing the relevant landmarks: the Church

of Sant'Andrea della Valle, the Farnese Palace, the Argentina Theatre where Tosca was engaged and the dominating Castel Sant'Angelo. Only the location of Cavaradossi's villa is a fiction. Inscribed on the map are the routes through the streets followed by the major participants during the course of the action. However, as the author points out, these are not without dramatic inconsistencies and logistical impossibilities.

The details and the characters ring true - the insecure prison system, the romantic painter dabbling in radical politics in a liaison with a rising star of the opera, who lives for her art and for love, and the lascivious and sadistic police chief who exploits the relationship to his own ends. In separate chapters, Nicassio suggests the contemporary backgrounds of each of these characters and identifies from a mass of anecdotal and substantiated stories possible real-life models for the roles in Sardou's play. For example, Cavaradossi could be an ex-student of David, whose pupils dominated the Prix-de-Rome at the time. Tosca could be one of many young opera singers to emerge from convent education in Verona and elsewhere, gradually but finally replacing castrati in the female roles. (The book goes deeply into the history of opera in Rome in the eighteenth century.)

The last four chapters, devoted to the opera itself, give a comprehensive bar-by-bar, line-by-line, blow-by-blow analysis of the music, the libretto, the motivations of the characters and their actions off stage. It illustrates how little flexibility is possible for directors of this particular opera if full justice is to be done to Puccini's invention! In these chapters Nicassio displays her musical as well as her historical knowledge.

Nicassio has based her book on a mass of meticulously researched evidence, clearly presented; the bibliography lists primary sources in Rome, London, Milan and New York plus fifteen pages of secondary sources. It is to be regretted, however, that the bibliography is not divided into two sections, one on 'Tosca' and one on 'Rome', separating fiction from fact.

Coda

Der Ring des Nibelungen

Curs'd gold and a Ring nicked by gods,
For building work paid two large bods.
To recover the Ring,
Devised Wotan their King
A game-plan with very long odds.

His daughter – incestuous twin -
Bore Siegfried to bring the gold in.
But, with recycled sword,
He, himself, grabbed the hoard
Then, fearless, his true love did win.

Deceived, through his quaffing drugged wine,
Bereaved, by an evil design,
She chose to expire
On his funeral pyre
The Ring ended up in the Rhine.

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