

MY LIFE AS AN IMPECUNIOUS OPERA LOVER

by Peter M. Scott

There are a number of reasons why a taste for the opera, once acquired, can prove difficult to satisfy, but the one most commonly encountered, in my experience, has been the expense involved. I have chosen, therefore, to begin this account of my own addiction to it by proposing that the primary objective of opera, as an artform, should be to combine music and drama in ways which give greater pleasure than might be obtainable from either of these elements separately at a lower cost. Serious students of the genre may see this as a statement of the obvious, but, in my case, it is a conclusion drawn from my own experience as a consumer of opera rather than a criterion adopted in advance. It is also a proposition with which some other consumers of opera, and even some producers of it, would seem, on the evidence available, to disagree, and I am willing to concede that it may only hold good for an operagoer who is also, like me, a concertgoer and playgoer, and of limited means.

Not that I had been to many, if any, plays or concerts when, against all possible odds, I attended my first opera in the wartime Britain of 1941 at the age of only fifteen, having spent a solidly working-class childhood in the backstreets of Bradford, Yorkshire, where my only musical education had been derived from a few gramophone records, the local chapel, the cinema, and, eventually, the radio, which my parents were unable to afford until I was nearly ten years old. The gramophone records, however, had been a part of my life for as long as I could remember, because most of them had been acquired before, or soon after, my own arrival on the scene (the first of three hungry mouths), as had the remarkable piece of furniture which stood against the rear wall of the overcrowded living room of our back-to-back terrace house.

On four elegant legs, veneered, varnished, and gleaming warmly in the firelight, a fine example of the cabinet maker's art, its purpose, in repose, was not immediately apparent, although a small round hole in its right side for a winding handle gave a clue to the fact that its polished top was a lid, which, when raised, would disclose the workings of a large acoustic gramophone. On closer inspection, two small doors in the front would open to reveal the fretwork covered outlet of the large horn, which, after winding down behind the clockwork motor from the needle in the head, would funnel the sound up and out with

increasing amplitude, to provide us, for much of my childhood, with the only in-house entertainment we did not have to make for ourselves. Since this cabinet of wonders had always been part of the furniture, I took its presence entirely for granted, never enquiring how it came to be there, but it was the finest example of the manual acoustic gramophone I ever came across in all the years I subsequently spent winding other models up.

The 78rpm. record collection, on the other hand, was a very mixed bag indeed. Apart from comic monologues, such as "The Lost Policeman", by a comedian called Sandy Powell, and a couple of military band pieces, it consisted entirely of vocal music with lyrics ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous, examples of which, from both ends of the spectrum, are engraved forever on my memory. In addition to a selection of popular songs of the 1920s (some of which find favour, still, with jazz musicians), and a number of yodelling records I would rather forget, there were several ballads by the incomparable Frank Crummit, including "Riding down from Bangor" and "Abdul Abulbul Amir", both of which I can still sing in full, a comic song or two, eg. "The Flies Crawl Up the Widow" by Jack Hulbert, and - a clue to my father's origins - a couple of ethnic pieces such as "The Road to the Isles" sung by Sir Harry Lauder.

Fortunately for me, there was a more serious side to the collection, including negro spirituals by the great Paul Robeson and several songs by the Australian baritone, Peter Dawson, who was amazingly popular in the 20s and 30s. In addition to his better known "Trees" and "Floral Dance" there were several pieces now consigned, not unfairly, to the dustbin of history, like the lugubrious "Sailor's Grave" and the egregious "Jovial Monk", but there were two very attractive songs, on each side of the same record, one entitled "Sirs, Your Toast" and the other, equally puzzlingly, "Room for the Factotum" (why not "Toreador" and "Figaro", I wondered?) which I was later to realise were famous operatic arias from Bizet's "Carmen" and Rossini's "Barber of Seville" respectively - the first I had ever heard. More recognisably, at the time, however, there was, thank goodness, operetta, and at its very best, too, in the shape of works by that blessed pair, Gilbert and Sullivan. Three 12" records entitled "Vocal Gems from The Pirates of Penzance, The Mikado, and HMS Pinafore", and it was by these, if anything, that the seed was planted which would eventually flourish and bear fruit.

But not for some time yet. When we finally got the radio, I took a much greater interest in the popular songs performed by the famous dance bands of the day than in anything of an operatic nature that might have been available over the airwaves. The most serious composer to figure in my parents' record collection was, of course, Handel, whose oratorio "The Messiah" was the cultural bedrock of the non-conformist Yorkshire of the time, with performances every year in every town in the West Riding, or so it seemed. It was represented here by the two great choruses "Hallelujah" and "Amen", and several of the arias, including "Comfort Ye", "Every Valley", and "I know that my redeemer liveth", all of which I enjoyed, but not as much as the Gilbert and Sullivan. Strangely enough, although excerpts from "The Messiah" were frequently performed at my local chapel, of which I was a regular patron (largely because I was sent there by my mother, and it was the only entertainment then available on a Sunday), I did not attend a full-length professional performance of it until after I had been to my first opera.

Even stranger is that I owe this latter experience, in the first instance, to no less a personage than Adolf Hitler, because it would not have occurred if I had not been sent, at the age of barely fourteen as a wartime evacuee, from Bradford to the small town of Keighley (pronounced Keethley), only eighteen miles away, where I was left largely to my own devices for two very enjoyable years. My first piece of luck was to make friends with one of my new classmates at the local grammar school, who was, in addition to being agreeable company, an accomplished pianist, good enough, already, not only to provide the accompaniment to whatever hymns we were obliged to sing at morning assembly, but also to be the resident organist at his own local chapel. Fortunately, too, his family made me welcome in their home, where the two of us began to hold regular sessions at the piano, devoted, almost entirely, to the Savoy operettas, of which he possessed, and was familiar with, most of the scores.

Although unable, at that stage, to read music or play a musical instrument, I was good with words, and, thanks possibly to the gramophone lessons of my childhood, had a keen enough ear to master any of the popular songs of the day after hearing them only a couple of times on the radio. I was not, therefore, inadequately equipped to pull my vocal weight in our duets, which were purely recreational, of course, but nourished my interest in music generally and left me with an abiding respect

for the talents of W.S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan. It seems more than likely that my affectionate familiarity with these witty musical comedies prepared the ground for my appreciation of the weightier music dramas I was soon to experience. Frivolous they may be, but never shallow, and, when judged against their design objectives, masterpieces of their kind, which may even, in performance, teach a valuable lesson to their more serious operatic relatives about the importance of articulating both the music and the words if the fullest impact of the whole on the listener is to be achieved.

My next piece of luck was to become involved, together with my new friend and a few other boys, in out-of-school activities of a communal nature initiated by the school's Art Master. My subsequent friendship with this gifted individual, who was later in life to become a Catholic priest, affected my personal development in a number of ways, but it is only of relevance here that, in addition to aspiring to sainthood, he was a man of wide culture, having studied at the Royal College of Art and travelled on a scholarship extensively in Europe and the Middle East before becoming a professional artist, and that he lived in a small cottage with no main services on the Airedale edge of Ilkley Moor where we were free to visit him whenever we felt like it. In addition to a piano, which he could play astonishingly well, a small library of books, and a modest shrine to the Virgin, the cottage also contained a portable gramophone and a large collection of records which, played over and over again, significantly enlarged my appreciation of serious music.

In pride of place, there was Beethoven's 5th Piano Concerto, "The Emperor", closely followed by Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik", both running, in those 78rpm. days, to several records each (involving much hurried re-winding), and, to this day, I cannot hear the opening bars of either of those works without being transported back, if only for a second, to the lamplit interior of that little cottage. Other favourites were Beethoven's 5th Symphony and Chopin's Ballade No.2 for piano, but of particular interest to me were records by the Italian tenor Beniamino Gigli singing, among other things, Bizet's "Agnus Dei", the Russian bass Chaliapin singing excerpts from the Orthodox Mass with a full choir, the English soprano Joan Cross, who, although I could not possibly have forseen it, I would soon see performing in the flesh, singing two of Mozart's operatic arias, "I remember" (the Countess's aria) from "The Marriage of Figaro", and "Ah, 'tis gone" (Pamina's aria) from

"The Magic Flute", the English contralto Kathleen Ferrier singing "Softly awakes my heart" from Saint-Saens's "Samson and Delilah", the lovely young American film star, Deanna Durbin, with whom I had fallen deeply in love a couple of years earlier, singing Schubert's "Ave Maria", and, finally, Joan Hammond (I think) singing the spectacular "Musetta's Waltz Song" from Puccini's "La Boheme".

One frequently played record was intriguingly labelled "Wotan's Farewell and Fire Music". This, our teacher friend explained, was an orchestral version of the closing moments of Wagner's great opera "The Valkyrie", and I can clearly remember him describing how, in the production he had witnessed, the summoning by Wotan of the fire around Brunhilde's rock had been greeted by the other valkyries (seated on surrounding mountain peaks) with the simultaneous raising of their clenched fists at appropriate points in the music. It would be forty years before I saw this great scene played out for myself, only to find that, disappointingly, the presence of the other valkyries was not a requirement of the script. Incidentally, I can also remember him describing (with graphic actions) how a famous ballet dancer called Anton Dolin performed his solo version of Ravel's "Bolero" - beginning by standing motionless with arms outstretched, then moving only his fingers in time to the music, then his hands, then his arms, and so on, as the crescendo developed, until, at the climax, his entire body was one enormous twitch.

We were vaguely aware that these and other marvels had been witnessed by our friend while he was studying in far distant London, but quite unaware that, even as he spoke, events were conspiring to bring some of London's otherwise unattainable attractions to us. Our unlikely benefactor was, once again, Herr Hitler, who, having failed to win the Battle of Britain in August 1940, had ordered the German Luftwaffe to begin blitzing London in earnest in September, and among the many institutions "bombed out" by this onslaught were the Sadler's Wells Opera and Ballet Companies, losing, in the process, most of their scenery and costumes. Never had an ill wind blown so many provincials so much good by ensuring that, for the rest of the war, two of the brightest jewels in Britain's cultural crown had little alternative but to go on more or less permanent tour in the provinces. And so it came to pass that, on Monday, August 25th, 1941, the Sadler's Wells Opera and Orchestra came to the Hippodrome Theatre, Keighley, for a whole week, and, taking advantage of this truly unusual, if not unique event -

occurring, as it did, towards the end of the long summer vacation, much of which we had spent at his cottage - our mentor offered to take my friend and me to the opera.

Although I could not know it at the time, I attended my first opera under virtually ideal conditions. Given the circumstances, of course, the stage scenery was vestigial, consisting of little more than two or three folding screens with doors in them, but the props and costumes were good enough for me, and the Keighley Hippodrome (long since gone, alas) was a little gem of a traditional Victorian theatre with stalls, boxes, circle, upper circle, and an orchestra pit of sufficient size to accomodate the Sadler's Wells Orchestra, which, according to the wartime programme (a single folded sheet, priced at twopence) consisted of three 1st violins, two 2nd violins, one viola, one violincello, one double bass, a flute, an oboe, a clarionet (sic), a basoon, two horns, and a piano, but seemed bigger than that to me. The opera was Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro" - the perfect choice!

Seated somewhere in the stalls, I could hear everything - every note, every word - and see every gesture. And, although I cannot speak for the quality of the singing or the acting, I can affirm that, from the moment the curtain rose, following the famous overture, to reveal John Hargreaves as Figaro and Joan Collier as Susanna, making a duet out of measuring up for a bed and trying on a hat, nothing came between me and the complete suspension of my disbelief until the final curtain fell. It all seemed so perfectly natural - the characters, the story, the short bits of sung dialogue linking the wonderful songs, everything moving the plot along at a spanking pace with never a dull moment. And genuinely funny, too. I came out into the night in a pleasurable daze, knowing that I could sit through the whole thing again with undiminished pleasure.

Hardly had I recovered from this ravishment of the senses, when, only two nights later, I was taken to another opera! This time it was Verdi's "La Traviata" - a completely different emotional experience, but with the same underlying fundamentals - characters, story (tragic this time, of course), a string of memorable songs, following each other in quick succession as the plot unfolded - all in place. Again, I found myself totally involved in the fate of Violetta (Janet Hamilton-Smith), and pretty disgusted with the behaviour of Alfred (Ben Williams), and his father (Tom Williams), unaware of any inadequacies in the production with regard to either the premises on which the

action was supposedly taking place, or the crowds of glamorous partygoers allegedly present in two of the scenes. The programme gives the names of eleven members of the Sadler's Wells Chorus, but five of these appear against minor characters on the cast list opposite. Obviously, then, what I was seeing was a rather anorectic version of the real thing, but I knew of none better, and it certainly worked for me, even without the ballet! By the end of that week, I knew, without a doubt, that I would take any future opportunity of going to the opera that came my way.

Things might have turned out differently, of course, if the first operas I had witnessed had not been so wisely chosen. There were other operas in the repertoire that week which I would probably have found less immediately captivating. One year later, for example, I was to watch the same company perform Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" and feel a sense of growing bewilderment as it emerged that there were only two good songs in the whole work, one of which didn't even have any words, and neither of them in the first act. Hard to believe, but I simply wasn't ready for it. My musical education had not yet reached the point at which my ear could perceive the patterns in the continuous musical tapestry woven by the composer, the beauties of which I was later to greet with increasing rapture.

There would have been a less favourable outcome, too, if, under some different dispensation, I had been taken to hear the same two operas sung in Italian. I can declare with a confidence based on later experience that I could never have entered so completely into the worlds of Figaro and Violetta had such a language barrier been erected between us. Any pleasure I might have derived from the singing would have been diminished by the growing irritation I would certainly have felt at being unable to understand what was being sung. Also worthy of note in this context is that we had seats in the stalls on both occasions. I cannot recall what contribution, if any, I made to the cost of these out of my meagre schoolboy's pocket money, but I do know that it was to be many years before I felt able to afford any but the cheapest of seats for the opera (always improved upon, of course, by careful advance booking, or, where unavoidable, queueing), and I cannot say by how much the impact on me of those first operas would have been diminished if I had been sitting up in "the Gods", but, obviously, the experience might not have been quite so decisive.

Years later, on Saturday, 30th of June, 1951 to be precise, the only tickets I felt able to afford for a performance of Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde" at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, with Svet Svanholm and Kirsten Flagstad in the title roles, found me perched so far up in the roof that I was unable to see all the stage, let alone understand what the principals were singing about at such inordinate length. I left the building at the first interval with a very poor impression of Wagner's operas, which was corrected only when, eighteen years later, I was persuaded to attend what turned out to be a totally absorbing performance of "The Mastersingers" by the Sadler's Wells Opera Company at the London Coliseum under the inspired baton of Reginald Goodall. But, more about that later...

Back in 1941, my schooldays having ended at the age of sixteen, I was obliged to return to the family home and set about earning a living, leaving any further progress up the musical ladder entirely to chance. But, once again, I was fortunate. On starting work as a trainee radiographer at the Bradford Royal Infirmary, I found that, among the many good things on offer in that exciting new world, was an older colleague who was an accomplished violinist, a regular performer in an amateur concert orchestra, and the repository of an extensive and detailed knowledge of serious music which, on learning of my interest, he was happy to share with me whenever an opportunity to do so arose. And opportunities were not long in coming, because it was barely six months after making his acquaintance that we went to our first opera together, inaugurating a companionship spanning the next four years and laying the foundations of a musical education upon which I would build for the rest of my life. Much of this experience involved fieldwork in theatres and concert halls, but the detail was in the homework, which was based on his extensive collection of gramophone records.

Listening to those records under suitable conditions presented a problem, however, because our homes were across the city from each other, and neither of us had access to a room of his own, but there was one place, very conveniently situated for both of us, where we could be assured of complete and undisturbed privacy. This, difficult as it may perhaps be to believe today, was our workplace, the X Ray Department, which opened, then, at 9am and closed promptly at 5pm on weekdays and 12 noon on Saturdays, only to be re-opened at other times in the direst of emergencies, and to which, outside those hours, we had free and legitimate access. Since, due to the possible radiation

hazard, the X Ray Department was tacked on the end of the main building, we could even spend the night there if we wished, sleeping on hospital trolleys, provided we were discreet about it, and excuses to do so were easily manufactured, thanks once again to Adolf Hitler. As members of the hospital's very own platoon of the Home Guard, we were obliged to be "on parade" there for training purposes on two evenings a week, and, after being dismissed, rather than cross the city to our homes and come back again in the morning, we could choose to stay there overnight, no questions asked. And there was a much better breakfast to be had from the friendly nurses on certain of the wards than any we could compound from our wartime rations at home.

We even had access to a large acoustic gramophone of the tabletop cabinet variety, which was easily transportable to our staff room, by hospital trolley, from its home in the adjacent Skin Clinic, where its daytime role was to provide suitable marching music (eg. "The Teddybears' Picnic") for groups of patients, circling around behind each other in dark glasses and bathing costumes under the artificial sunshine of several powerful ultraviolet lamps. Thus, in our cosy, centrally-heated staff room den, we wanted for nothing, and spent many happy hours during those dark wartime days listening, in companionable silence, to lots of great music, interrupted only by the need to change the record at five minute intervals and wind the gramophone up. But this was after we had first gone to the opera together in August 1942, almost exactly one year to the day after I had been to my first opera in Keighley. And, once again, it was the Sadler's Wells Opera Company, still on tour.

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There were two commercial theatres in Bradford at the time, both of them in the hands of that great Northern impresario, Francis Laidler, as was, indeed, the Keighley Hippodrome. One, the imposing, free-standing Alhambra, dominated one corner of Town Hall Square with its twin towers and large, ornamental dome, the other, the smaller, less conspicuous Prince's Theatre facing it from beyond the cenotaph. The Alhambra was renowned throughout Yorkshire for its magnificent Christmas Pantomimes featuring national, and even international, celebrities of stage, screen and radio, and for the equally star-studded variety shows it mounted during the rest of the year. The Prince's was occupied, for most of the time, by a repertory theatre company known locally as "'Arry 'Anson's Players" who performed there twice

nightly, with matinees on Wednesday and Saturday, mostly drawing room dramas. Not surprisingly, it was to the Prince's Theatre that the Sadler's Wells Opera Company came when they visited Bradford, which they continued to do, I'm happy to say, at irregular intervals until the end of the war.

Although larger than the Keighley Hippodrome, the Prince's was cast in the same Victorian mould, with stalls, circle, and an upper circle, where my friend and I were invariably to be found on these occasions because the cheapness of the seats made it possible for us to afford all the four operas usually included in the week's repertoire, each given twice (there being six evening performances and matinees on Thursday and Saturday), at a time when I was earning only seventeen shillings and sixpence a week. But sitting in "t'Gods", at the Prince's Theatre, was a unique experience in its own right, since there were no separate seats up there, only serried rows of thinly-padded, continuous benches, curving round from one end of the balcony to the other. One consequence of this was that seats were not reservable in advance, and could only be ensured by queueing in the street outside the theatre until the box office opened before the performance.

With the war now in its third year, there was no shortage of supplicants for a glimpse of other, more colourful worlds through any crack in the ambient austerity that presented itself, so the queues for those opera performance at the Prince's began to form early, and, by the time the doors opened, had grown to seemingly over-optimistic lengths. But my friend and I were always well to the fore, and, when admitted, would race up the spiral staircase to bag the best possible positions on the front benches, spreading out our limbs, once there, to occupy as comfortable an amount of space as possible. All around us, other patrons, mainly the impecunious young, would be similarly engaged in staking their claims until all the benches seemed to be completely full, at which point, a uniformed attendant of burly build, who soon became known to us as "The Bumshifter", would appear and proceed, by a series of increasingly expressive gestures, to persuade, cajole or bully those already in situ to squeeze up closer together along the benches and make it possible for another quantum of ticket holders to be admitted.

To this day, I cannot encounter the expression "a packed house" without recalling that solid wall of humanity, stacked up into the roof of the Prince's Theatre, Bradford. It was a far cry

from the stalls at the Hippodrome, Keighley, from which I had viewed my first operas in such ideal conditions, but I soon learned that, when the lights went down and the curtain went up, silence would descend, all fidgeting cease, and any sense of discomfort go into suspension as the music drama took hold. But, unfortunately, the work performed on that first Monday evening in August, 1942, was Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" and the magic didn't work quite as well as I had led myself to expect.

For a start, there was no overture, as such, just a few dozen bars of incidental music, allowing barely enough time for the audience to inspect the quaint oriental interior revealed by the rising curtain before an American naval lieutenant in uniform and a Japanese native in a curious mixture of traditional and western attire entered and began discussing the idiosyncracies of the local domestic architecture and the country's property laws before moving on to inspect the servants. This was followed by the arrival of an older Yank in civvies and a conversation between the two compatriots about a forthcoming marriage, punctuated by exchanges on the subject of liquid refreshment such as "Another whisky?" "Yes, but not much soda", all of which I found rather uninvolving.

Obviously, I knew who these characters were and what they were up to, thanks to information gleaned from the programme, and, as the first act unfolded, snatches of melody were sung from time to time which sounded quite promising, but none of them ever seemed to really get going. Early in the second act the tragic heroine sang the only identifiably complete song in the opera, "One Fine Day", and at the end of the act there was the charming Humming Chorus, but the last act, absorbing though the drama had now become, yielded nothing I could take away with me except a resolve to find out what there was about the opera that I had missed. It never occurred to me to doubt that the fault was in myself, since I took it entirely for granted that Sadler's Wells would not have brought any but their most deservedly popular operas to wartime Bradford. Perhaps I should add that, this deferential attitude to any acclaimed artistic masterpiece found unrewarding on first acquaintance, was to stand me in pretty good stead until my own critical faculties were sufficiently well-developed for me to trust my own judgement. I can recommend it.

What I did not appreciate at the time was that Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" was a twentieth century opera (1904), whereas Verdi's

"La Traviata" had been written in the nineteenth (1853), and Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro" in the eighteenth century (1786), and that, during the hundred and twenty years between the first and the last of these, there had been a continuous evolution in the complexity and scope of European orchestral music which had not only been reflected in the operas conceived while it was taking place, but had owed a great deal to innovations made by the composers of those very same operas, who, striving always after increasingly dramatic effect, were freer to experiment with orchestral colour and even musical form in the opera house than in the concert hall. As a result of these pressures, the operatic conventions inherited from the seventeenth century had been fashioned into new and quite different shapes.

I was eventually to learn that opera, as a distinct art form, had been literally invented from scratch in Florence in 1597, long before Mozart, by a group of artists, musicians and poets in imitation of what they imagined to be the characteristics of classic Greek drama, a combination of all the arts - poetry, drama, music, singing, dancing, and scene painting - in one vehicle. The idea caught on, particularly in Venice, and the earliest surviving operas still performed today are those of Monteverdi - "Orpheus" (1607), "The Return of Ulysses" (1641), and "The Coronation of Poppea" (1642). These are by no means museum pieces, and the last two in particular can, in sympathetic hands, be more engaging than many of the operas produced in later years when opera had become a popular form of entertainment throughout the whole of Europe. By which time three different kinds of opera had developed.

The two most prominent forms were Italian in origin - serious opera (*opera seria*) and comic opera (*opera buffa*) - each with its own set of conventions, although both relied on the unfolding of a story line upon which separate songs (arias) were strung like beads, and any dialogue required to move the plot along between the arias was sung, to sketchy instrumental accompaniment, in a sort of declamatory freestyle chant called *recitative*. Opera seria concerned itself with stories and legends, usually of a tragic nature, about the gods, heroes, kings, and queens of antiquity, expressed, because of their exalted status, entirely in elaborately ornamented solo arias of an introspective nature, which were delivered by singers of such highly acclaimed virtuosity that credibility of plot was progressively sacrificed on the altar of vocal display. Opera buffa was developed in reaction to the unremitting nobility of the sentiments aired by one statuesque protagonist after another

in opera seria, drawing on earlier forms of popular musical entertainment, such as the traditional *comedia del arte*, to portray more recognisable, less morally elevated characters, usually involved in amorous intrigues of a sufficiently convoluted nature to give rise to duets, trios, quartets, and other ensembles of an exhilarating complexity. This is the style in which Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro" was composed.

Meanwhile, in countries outside Italy, other forms of light opera were being developed using the local vernacular, with spoken dialogue between the songs instead of recitative. This was known as ballad opera in England, opera comique in France, singspiel in Germany, and zarzuela in Spain. Mozart wrote two fine examples of singspiel, "The Escape from the Seraglio" and "The Magic Flute" which still feature in the popular repertoire. Mozart, in fact, played a pivotal role in the development of opera, moving freely between opera seria, opera buffa and singspiel, allowing his genius to disregard the conventions whenever it suited him to introduce elements of opera seria into both opera buffa and singspiel. His masterpiece, "Don Giovanni", is ostensibly a free-flowing opera buffa, but it starts with an indecent assault followed quickly by a murder, and ends with the unrepentant culprit being dragged painfully down to hell by an animated stone statue. Lots of fun and games in between, of course, but dark deeds and detective work dominate the plot and colour the music to such an extent that what is arguably the greatest opera ever written is quite impossible to categorise.

By Verdi's time, commercial pressures (particularly from the bourgeois Parisian audiences whose tastes now dominated the European operatic scene) had continued the erosion of these earlier distinctions until opera seria had become grand opera, which, as the name implies, was as lavishly mounted as the size of the theatre and the ingenuity of its stage machinery would allow. Like opera seria, it was sung throughout, but now told romantic tales with tragic endings about members of the upper classes who had figured in momentous events in the not too distant past, or in contemporary plays or novels on similar themes. It differed from opera seria, also, in featuring on-stage choruses and ballets as well as ensembles ranging from duets to sextets between the various protagonists whenever a suitable opportunity to do so arose from the plot, all of them borrowings, originally, from opera buffa, which, itself, continued to thrive in a "grander" form. As did opera comique, which, in spite of its name, was not necessarily funny in

intention. and differed from grand opera, in the end, only by involving more characters from the lower orders and using spoken dialogue between the arias.

More importantly for the future, however, was the tendency in the mainstream grand opera for the demarcation between recitative and aria to disappear as the dialogue between the arias, and the orchestral accompaniment to it, became more aria-like (or *arioso*) in conception, and the arias became less decorative and introspective. Because it dared to be a contemporary moral tale rather than a romantic period drama, Verdi's "La Traviata" was a commercial failure when it was first performed, but, in other respects, it is not untypical of the grand opera of its period. The luxurious salon-ballroom-casino scenes allow plenty of scope for extravagant display and even for the introduction of the ballet dancers with whom the Parisian male audiences were so besotted that no opera was thought to be complete without them. More remarkable, however, is the continuous, sinewy flow of the music, carrying the action along and supporting the vocal line between the arias, particularly in the all-important first act, getting the story off to flying start. There are several recognisably distinct arias in this act but they seem to emerge quite naturally from the sung dialogue, and, although they contain a certain amount of decoration and even some repetition, their gist is to move the story forward instead of holding up the action in the interests of vocal display, as had the arias in the opera seria of the past. Clearly, the dramatic is taking over from the decorative.

But it was a contemporary of Verdi's, the German composer Richard Wagner (whose works I had yet to encounter), who took the ultimate step of integrating all the contributory elements of traditional opera into one continuously unfolding tapestry of interwoven words and music, to ensure that, by the time Puccini came to write "Madame Butterfly" the transformation, in Italian opera, was complete, and the boundaries between dialogue and aria had all but disappeared in the interests of realism, or *verismo*, as it was called when it was adopted as a deliberate style of opera composition in the 1890s. Decoration and repetition had also gone from the vocal line and even from the orchestral accompaniment which now took on a significantly expanded role in the narration of the story, in fact, the orchestra had become, not only a major player in the drama, but a reliable source of information about what was happening on the stage. Thus, the musical structure of opera had grown to

resemble that of a symphonic poem, or, better still, a concerto for voices and orchestra, in which significant patterns emerge in either the vocal line or the orchestral accompaniment, and are developed, intertwined, distorted, and deconstructed to any extent that might serve to increase the emotional impact of the drama.

Little wonder, then, that, after "The Marriage of Figaro", and "La Traviata", I found "Madame Butterfly" rather unrewarding on first acquaintance. I was sixteen, I was looking at the surface and listening for the songs. By the time Sadler's Wells brought the opera to Bradford again (with no less a person than Joan Cross in the title role) I was learning to listen to the music three-dimensionally, as it were, and Puccini's magic had begun to cast the spell which still binds me to his operas today. How, I ask myself now, could I ever have found that first act of "Madame Butterfly" with its heavenly choir announcing the arrival of the bride and her retinue, its brutal execration of the apostate Butterfly by her uncle the Bonze, and its final love duet, probably the most erotic piece of musical intercourse ever performed on an operatic stage, all of them woven thematically into one organic whole, how could I ever have found it so uninvolving? But I did then. Fortunately. However, the following evening my friend and I went to the opera again, this time it was Verdi's "Rigoletto". What a comeback!

If anything was needed to restore my belief in opera as value for money, it was this masterpiece of Verdi's middle period. "Rigoletto" has it all - a convincing storyline, lifelike characters interacting with each other in credible ways, inspiring Verdi to produce a wider variety of vocal and orchestral effects than he had ever done before. It was a milestone in a career which still had more than forty successful years to go, and he himself was known to refer to it later as his best opera, describing it once as "...the best subject as regards theatrical effect that I've ever set to music." It certainly went down well with me. I sat through it completely entranced by the story and the music, unfolding in a seemingly continuous succession of arias, many of which I recognised - choruses, solos, duets, trios, culminating, of course, in the famous quartet in the last act. [For the record, Rigoletto was sung that night by Tom Williams, the Duke by Ben Williams (there was even a Rhys Williams singing Borsa!), Gilda by Rose Hill, the murderous Sparafucile, one of my favourite opera characters, by Roderick Lloyd (the Welsh were out in force, it seems, with

Myfanwy Edwards singing Giovanna), and Maddalena by Rose Morris].

After "Rigoletto", only the wildest of horses could have prevented me from going to any opera that came Bradford's way during the next four years, and I soon found that such visitations did not depend only on the wartime wanderings of Sadler's Wells. Surprising as it may seem today, there was another opera company in existence at the time which had been touring the provinces since long before Sadler's Wells had been blitzed into doing so. Now called the Royal Carl Rosa Opera Company, it had been founded as long ago as 1873 by a German violinist of that name, allegedly as a showcase for the talents of his wife, Euphrosene Parepa, an English-born soprano of Greek/Italian parentage, but with the overt aim of presenting opera in English, and had not only given the first performances in English of such famous works as "The Flying Dutchman", "Rienzi", "Lohengrin", "Carmen", and "Aida" but had also commissioned a number of British composers to write operas for the company.

[I later learned that, in its heyday, the Carl Rosa had three ensembles touring simultaneously and even had its own train, with principals up front, gentlemen's chorus behind and a separate carriage for the ladies chorus. The company began to flounder after WWII and finally folded in 1960. Its reserves were used to support a trust charged with maintaining its historic costume collection and music archive and funding scholarships for young singers. Amazingly, it was resuscitated in 1998 for a three week tour of the North of England to celebrate the 125th anniversary of its foundation which was so successful that a three month season followed in 1999 and by 2000, an ensemble of 60+ singers and musicians was performing for 47 weeks a year and embarked on a tour of ANZ in 2001, and Japan on 2002.

Originally given to mounting long London seasons followed by star-studded stints in Manchester and other major provincial cities, plus tours of America, by the time it came to my grateful attention the Carl Rosa had undoubtedly seen better days, but I didn't know that then, although it was obvious, even to me, that the company's singers did not quite measure up to the vocal talents of the Sadler's Wells team. What the Carl Rosa did have, however, was the scenery and props available to mount more ambitious productions, and, being an established touring company, to do this at the more prestigious Alhambra

whenever it visited Bradford. For my friend and me, this meant the relative luxury of separate Upper Circle seats, bookable in advance, and relief from the attentions of the Prince's Theatre's "Bumshifter", although it has to be said that the Alhambra had the steepest rake on its Upper Circle I have ever encountered. Taking one's seat up there for the first time could be a rather unnerving experience (and probably still is), a bit like looking over the edge of a cliff. I can remember on one occasion, meeting, as I was going in, two soldiers coming out, one of whom, obviously distressed and pale, was trying to explain to the other that he couldn't possibly occupy the seat he had just purchased without being taken ill. The poor chap must have been acrophobic.

Unfortunately, my only Carl Rosa programmes to have survived the vicissitudes of my sixty plus years on earth since then, are for Johan Strauss's "Die Fledermaus" and Puccini's "La Boheme", but I know that I also saw them do Verdi's "Il Trovatore" and that ever popular double bill of short operas, Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana" and Leoncavallo's "I Pagliacci" (commonly known as "Cav and Pag") because I can clearly remember two things about the performances which might serve to convey the flavour of those wartime Carl Rosa productions. The first occurred in the second act of "Il Trovatore" when the curtain rose on the famous Anvil Chorus to reveal that, in the hope of lending an air of verisimilitude to the proceedings, a fully functioning electrical carbon arc had been incorporated into the hammer and anvil of one of the labouring blacksmiths. The result was that three of the gypsies were hammering away mightily to no visible effect while a fourth was lightly touching hammer to anvil with extreme caution to produce an almighty blinding flash which was not only rather distracting to the cast, but gave rise to much rib-nudging in the upper circle.

The other incident arose from the exigencies of the plot and the casting of a particular performance of "Cavalleria Rusticana", in the second half of which, Alfio, the wronged husband, challenges Turiddu, the adulterer, to a duel. In accepting the challenge, Turiddu is obliged by Sicilian custom (this being a verismo opera) to grab hold of Alfio and bite his ear, an action which, difficult enough as it was to interpret when first beheld, was rendered even more ambiguous, in the Carl Rosa production, by the fact that the role of Alfio was filled by Kingsley Lark, well-known at the time for being "the tallest man in opera", standing well over six feet, while the tenor playing Turiddu was barely five feet tall and rather on the plump side.

This meant that we were treated to the spectacle of an impassioned Turiddu rushing across the stage to leap up and wrap his arms around the neck of an Alfio who had obligingly bent himself forward to receive what looked very like a fond embrace sealed with a loving kiss. It took a bit a' sorting out, as they say in Yorkshire.

Verdi wrote "Il Trovatore" between "Rigoletto" and "La Traviata" and it contains some of his finest music, but, unlike the other two, it tells a story that is dramatically unconvincing. The opera is notorious for the alleged incomprehensibility of its plot, but this is not entirely fair, since, compared with, say, Verdi's own "Simon Boccanegra", the plot of "Il Trovatore" is a model of clarity, although it does rely rather heavily on a lot of early exposition of the "let-me-remind-you-all-that-the-boss-is-madly-in-love-with-the-heroine-and-very-jealous-of-an-elusive-rival" variety, and even resorts to the "tell-us-that-story-again-old-man-about-how-the-boss's-brother-mysteriously-disappeared-about-twenty-years-ago" ploy in order to prepare the audience for future developments. And it has to be conceded that, even when sung in English, this important information can be difficult to grasp, but the real problem is the unbelievability of the plot which harks back to the days when the libretto of an opera was expected to provide excuses, rather than reasons, for the arias to be sung, and characters were motivated and behaved in ways that served this purpose with little regard for the realities of life as it is actually lived.

None of which prevented "Il Trovatore" from being a big success from the beginning, nor its music from becoming immensely popular in the world outside the opera house, but the fact that it could be enjoyed for the music alone did not blind me to its shortcomings, even at that first encounter because I was already beginning to learn from my own reactions to it that opera, as music drama, is an entity which can be more powerfully affecting than either music or drama experienced separately. For this magic to work, however, there has to be something like a chemical reaction between the constituent elements to produce an effect which is more than the sum of its parts and makes the whole work superior in quality to the music, or the drama, or even the singing that goes into it. For me, the catalyst for this transmutation seems to lie, all other things being equal, in the credibility of the plot and the character, and the extent to which I can be persuaded to care about them.

The importance of this extra dimension was made even more apparent to me by the juxtaposition of "Cav and Pag". Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana" was sensationally successful when it first appeared in 1890 and is credited with initiating the verismo movement in opera by exploring rough peasant life in a remote Sicilian village "according to concepts which are absolutely modern (in that) its music springs and spreads solely from the situation and not according to the old pattern of construction (based) on the aria." as one eminent contemporary critic wrote. There is no doubt that Mascagni's music is arresting, although it features both arias and choruses which would not have seemed out of place in more conventional operas of the time, and there are passages where the emotional weight of the music overloads the banality of the words being sung.

The plot, however, is easy to follow, since it verges on the vestigial and is entirely set in an Italian village square on Easter Sunday, but it only gets going after a good deal of local colour has been evoked, first, by a chorus of villagers singing about the joys of being villagers, and then, by Alfio, a waggoner, singing about the joys of being a waggoner. What eventually emerges, as told by a young woman, Santuzza, to an older one, Lucia, who keeps the corner wineshop, is that the latter's son, the eponymous hero, Turridu, an unemployed ex-soldier, is a man with few redeeming features. Having previously seduced Santuzza with promises of marriage, he has now cast her aside to pursue an adulterous affair with the lovely Lola, whenever her husband, Alfio, is waggoning away from home. This exposition is followed by a static choral number, an Easter Hymn, after which everyone goes into church except Santuzza, who waits to confront Turridu, finally making his appearance, with her knowledge of his affair with Lola, and to beg him to make an honest doormat of her, a request that Turridu contemptuously refuses after abusing her for spying on him. Their conversation is interrupted at one point by Lola flouncing across the square on her belated way to church, giving the guilty pair an opportunity to humiliate Santuzza still further by flaunting their illicit relationship at her.

After Turridu has followed Lola into church, along comes Alfio, also late for church, to be told by the now vengeful Santuzza about the goings-on in his bed behind his back. Not surprisingly, Alfio reacts to this news with threats of violence against his wife's lover, whereupon Santuzza is moved to indulge in remorse for her indiscretion before they both go off, leaving the stage empty for the famously lyrical orchestral Intermezzo,

after which events take their inevitable course. The villagers emerge from the church and head for the wineshop where Turridu sings an ingratiating drinking song, but Alfio insults the offered wine in words which leave Turridu with no alternative but to bite his ear. Alfio exits to await their confrontation in the orchard, while Turridu, rather confusingly, voices concern about what will become of Santuzza if he loses the knife fight, and, after asking his bemused mother for her blessing and urging her to take care of Santuzza if anything should happen to him, rushes off to meet his doom, which is announced by an off-stage scream and suitably portentous music barely sixty seconds after his departure.

Apart from the ear-biting incident, itself just another piece of local colour added on for effect, there is so little on-stage action in "Cavalleria Rusticana" that the piece could be performed more cheaply in the concert hall as an oratorio with little loss of dramatic impact, thus failing what was to become, in my view, the acid test of opera-worthiness. But no such criticism can be levelled at Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci", which appeared only two years later with a libretto by the composer, allegedly based on an actual incident. This opera also takes place in an Italian village square, where a temporary stage has been erected for a performance later that Easter Monday evening by a troupe of travelling *comedia del arte* players, of which the opera's principal protagonists, Canio, the middle-aged actor-manager, Nedda, his lovely young wife, and Tonio, an ugly hunchback, are members. Before this opening scene can be revealed, however, the overture is dramatically interrupted by Tonio bursting through the curtains, in full clown's fig, to sing a prologue at the startled audience which sets out the underlying theme of what is to follow.

The gist of this well-known aria is that, under their fancy costumes and make-up, actors are ordinary human beings, subject to the same feelings, faults and failings as the audience, a fact which the drama they are about to witness will demonstrate. The curtain then rises on a scene of great excitement among the villagers as the troupe arrives on site with drums beating and much comic hoop-la. During the course of these celebrations, however, Canio is provoked into revealing a jealous nature when the crowd pokes fun at him over a piece of impromptu character-acting between Tonio and Nedda. He declares that he may be made a fool of by Columbine's flirtations with Harlequin on stage, but anyone trying it on with his wife in real life would elicit quite a different response. After announcing the time of the

evening's performance, Canio and the other member of the troupe, Peppe (the Harlequin), go off with some of the village men to the local pub, but Tonio elects to stay behind.

Alone with Nedda, the shambling hunchback clumsily reveals that he is harbouring a genuine passion for her, and although Nedda treats this declaration as a joke at first, when Tonio tries to demonstrate his ardour, she cannot conceal her revulsion and beats him off with a whip, after which he slinks away, vowing to take his revenge. An opportunity to do so quickly presents itself when a young man called Silvio enters to reveal himself as Nedda's secret lover and tries to persuade her to give up her wandering life and come away with him, little knowing that their preliminary embraces have been observed by the still lurking Tonio who has gone off to fetch Canio from the tavern. The two of them arrive back just as Nedda has agreed to elope with Silvio after the evening's performance and the couple are again demonstrating their feelings for each other, at the sight of which Canio explodes with rage and pursues the fleeing Silvio into the woods, leaving Tonio to gloat over Nedda's predicament.

When the distraught Canio returns, having failed to catch up with his quarry, he threatens to kill Nedda unless she tells him the name of her lover, something which she steadfastly refuses to do, but before he can carry out his threat, Tonio takes him aside and advises him to hold his hand, pointing out that Nedda's lover will certainly be in the audience for the evening's performance and might somehow reveal himself. This calms Canio down sufficiently for him to declare that, as the show must go on, he will deal with Nedda later, but, left alone to prepare himself for the performance, he gives vent to his true feelings about this tactic in one of the most famous (and self-pitying) arias ever written.

The dramatic intensity of the second part of "Pagliacci" owes much to the fact that the action takes place on a stage on the stage. The audience assembles, the curtain rises and the players begin to perform their well-worn routines to the accompaniment of suitably light-hearted music. Pagliaccio is enticed away by Taddeo so that Columbine can entertain Harlequin to supper in his absence, much to the delight of the audience, but a sombre note soon intrudes as Canio, unable to control his feelings when returning to the stage, steps out of character to reproach Nedda for her infidelity, something which the audience greets at first as a new and entertaining twist to the old plot. The tension heightens as Nedda tries desperately to return to

the spirit of the original comedy, but Canio is too far gone in rage and demands to know the name of her lover. When she replies inconsequentially with the forced lightness of a Columbine, he snaps completely and, picking up a table knife, stabs her in the heart. Realising, too late, that Nedda needs help, Silvio rushes to her assistance from his place in the now horrified audience only to be stabbed to death himself by Canio, who then lowers the curtain and tells us that the comedy is ended.

Now, *that* is an opera! It may be second-rate drama set to second-rate music, but, in my book, at least, it is undoubtedly first-rate opera. All the action takes place on stage, the characters are well enough drawn for us to empathise with them, and they interact with each other in credible ways, singing passionate words set to music which adds to their emotional weight without overloading them. Little wonder, then, that "Pagliacci" was as big a hit as "Cavalleria Rusticana" had been, nor that the two operas became so indissolubly linked together in the operatic repertoire. On the strength of this achievement, both Mascagni and Leoncavallo went on to write further operas, but none of these has stood the test of time, although Leoncavallo did enjoy some success with his "La Boheme", but, unfortunately, it wasn't as good as Puccini's version which had appeared the year before.

"La Boheme" was Puccini's first really verismo opera, but I was unaware of this distinction when I saw it done by the Carl Rosa, who, incidentally, had been responsible for its first performance in England back in 1897. Fortunately, I found it less uninvolving, on first acquaintance, than "Madame Butterfly", having been bounced by Puccini, once again sans overture, straight into the opera buffa behaviour of an impecunious and irreverent bunch of male bohemians (poet, painter, scholar and musician) making mock high drama out of trying to keep themselves warm and fed (and avoid paying the rent) in their Parisian garret. This opening sequence of male voice duet, trio, quartet, and, finally (with the arrival of the landlord), quintet could hardly fail to be entertaining, but, cleverly written as it is, it depends, for its full effect, on a better understanding of the genuinely witty words than can usually be obtained from a live performance, even when sung in English. It was to be many years before I came to appreciate this fact while watching the opera sung in Italian, but subtitled in English, on video.

There is no difficulty, however, in following what transpires when a young lady from upstairs drops in on the now solitary poet before he can follow his boisterous friends to the pub. It's a simple case of boy meets girl, and, after chatting each other up in the moonlight, they fall in love, but it would be no exaggeration to say that, in the sequence of arias Puccini wrote for this lovely long exchange between Mimi and Rudolfo, he was presenting the world with the credentials of an opera composer standing head and shoulders above his contemporaries. It was only spoiled for me, on that first occasion, by the failure of either of the Carl Rosa principals quite to reach the excruciatingly high final notes they are required to sing offstage as they depart, arm in arm, to join the gang at the Cafe Momus where the second act is to take place. A second act, happily, no less accessible than the first, and, given the number of characters on stage and the amount of activity they engage in during the course of it, one of Puccini's greatest pieces of operatic architecture.

The bohemians' rendezvous is a pavement cafe in a bright and busy square in the Latin Quarter where the crowds are busily Christmas shopping, but the principal theme of the action is the stormy relationship between the painter, Marcello, and his estranged girl friend, Musetta, who quite ruins his evening by making a flamboyant entrance on the arm of an elderly admirer and seating herself, quite deliberately, at an adjoining table. Provoked by Marcello's attempts to ignore her, she embarks on an increasingly outrageous counter-offensive to attract his attention, culminating in an aria which entertains everyone within earshot to a catalogue of her own physical charms. This is, of course, the so-called Waltz Song I had first encountered on gramophone record in that cottage on the edge of the moors, but, seductive as it is, it fails to achieve her desired effect until the now desperate Musetta tricks her consort into leaving the scene, whereupon Marcello finally succumbs. Rising from his seat, to a swirling orchestral arpeggio, he sings of his admiration for her to the melody of her own song, a vocal tribute in which he is quickly joined by Colline and Schaunard, the other two bohemians, who have been deriving a great deal of amusement from the "stupendous comedy" being played out before them.

For me, this is one of those really great moments in opera when music and drama combine to deliver something I like to think of as "the authentic operatic experience" - a genuinely *physical* effect, a sort of tingling sensation running pleasurably down

the spine, more intense than any such thrill produced by music or drama separately, although the hairs at the back of my neck have never been immune to being disturbed by either. There are none of these moments, however, in the third act of "La Boheme" which is, to my mind, more "Cavalleria Rusticana" than "Pagliacci". There is plenty of good music, of course, and the setting is picturesque, but the action is confined to a series of rather contrived exchanges between the four principals conveying the information that, in the two months which have elapsed since the end of the second act, the rosy glow has faded and the relationship between Rudolfo and Mimi has proved even more unworkable, if for different reasons, than that between Marcello and Musetta. Although Mimi goes off with Rudolfo in the end, this is not before she has overheard him telling Marcello that she is dying of tuberculosis and needs someone wealthier than him to look after her.

The purpose of this third act is merely to set things up for the last act which takes place in the Monmatre garret where it all began, and where generous helpings of top quality opera remain to be served, ranging from the pinings of Rudolfo and Marcello for their lost loves, through the escapist horseplay they indulge in when joined by their fellow bohemians, dramatically interrupted by the entrance of Musetta with the news that the dying Mimi is outside, to the final death bed scene itself. Needless to say, Puccini does not allow any of these opportunities to slip through his fingers when weaving his musical web around them, and while it would be wrong to say that everyone in the audience weeps over the death of little Mimi, it is difficult to see how any operagoer could remain unmoved by it. Puccini wrings more pathos out of Mimi than he does out of either Butterfly or Tosca, both of whom die heroic, and poignant deaths by their own hand to the accompaniment of orchestral fortissimos which leave the audience stunned with horror and pity, rather than shedding a silent tear. Like his Manon before her, Mimi simply fades away, but most affectingly.

With "La Boheme", Puccini joined Mozart and Verdi in my personal Holy Trinity of opera, but I had to wait a long time for his "Tosca" and much longer for "Turandot", because the only other opera staged in wartime Bradford, apart from "Die Fledermaus", impossible not to enjoy at first acquaintance, was a work of even greater appeal. This was Rossini's "The Barber of Seville", surely the most successful opera buffa ever written after "The Marriage of Figaro", with which, remarkably, it has no less than five characters in common, since it purports to

show how the Count Almaviva of the latter work met and married his Countess, snatching her from the clutches of her guardian, Doctor Bartolo, with the help of the eponymous barber, Figaro, and the venal music-master, Don Basilio, all of whom had appeared in the earlier work. There are marked differences in characterisation, however, because "The Barber" is much more overtly farcical than "The Marriage", and was cobbled together by Rossini in about three weeks to fill a gap in an opera season already in progress by utilising a specific range of vocal talents available to him at the time.

Even Rossini, hardened pro that he was, might have been surprised to learn that, of the 40 operas he wrote in 15 years before retiring from the stage at the age of only 37, this early pot boiler would be the one he was to be most remembered by, but repeated viewings never seem to detract from its appeal. The plot is virtually traditional commedia del arte - the plans of an elderly guardian to marry his nubile ward are frustrated by a young nobleman, who, posing as a poor student and ably assisted by the harliquinesque local barber, penetrates the heavily guarded household in disguise, twice, before succeeding in marrying the girl himself after a failed elopement - but, as it rattles along behind the almost too famous overture, it throws up some of the most memorable arias in the operatic repertoire (including, of course, that "Room for the Factotum" I had encountered on my father's gramophone in my childhood), interspersed with episodes of highly inventive musical comedy, and a first act finale which involves the entire cast and chorus in a masterly crescendo of confusion and leaves everyone, audience included, quite breathless.

"The Barber of Seville" was the last of the five operas in the repertoire of the itinerant Sadler's Wells. Added to those being toured by the Carl Rosa at the time, this brought the number of different operas I had seen performed by the end of the war to ten, but the value of this investment only became apparent to me later. At the time, my appetite for opera was no greater than that for the other cultural delights on offer in Bradford during those years. One of the most memorable of these I owed to the same bomb that had rendered the Sadler's Wells Opera temporarily homeless, since, in doing so, it had simultaneously evicted the Sadler's Wells Ballet. Needless to say, my friend and I stood ready to take the fullest possible advantage of their misfortune when they came to the same Prince's Theatre as had their sibling company.

At the age of seventeen, my first encounter with ballet was hardly less affecting than my introduction to opera had been at fifteen. The mild initial shock I experienced at the sight of men in tights dancing in a manner I had hitherto regarded as normal only in women, quickly gave way to my admiration for their artistry, and the muscular athleticism underpinning it - and it goes without saying that women in tights presented no problem at all. Compared to opera, which was to give me much the greater satisfaction in later years, ballet can seem rather two-dimensional, particularly if taken in excess, but there is little to dislike about it and much to enjoy, and I have to admit that I have never spent a boring evening at the ballet, whereas I have, alas, sat through several such at the opera.

It may be that the disciplines of the dance virtually guarantee that its performers will excel in beauty of form and grace of movement, unaffected by the sort of visual incongruities which can dilute one's concentration during even the best opera productions, when, for example, the possessor of the ideal voice does not find it possible to look the part, let alone act it. But it may also be that ballet has been better positioned than opera to cope with the profound changes which have taken place, during the twentieth century, in the melodies, harmonies and rhythms favoured by the composers of serious music, some of whom have even used ballet as their chosen medium for experiment. It certainly seems to be the case that, where a modern composer has written for both ballet and opera, his ballets have found their way into the popular repertoire more easily than his operas, and also that audiences nurtured on the operas of past centuries have experienced more difficulty in relating to the works of the 20th century than have audiences for ballets of such different vintages.

Or is it simply that opera, being more complex, is more difficult to bring off, dispensing greater pleasure when it succeeds but more acute discomfort when it fails? Happily, questions of this kind were far from my mind when I first saw a young Margot Fonteyn dance Swanhilda to Robert Helpman's Doctor Coppelius on a cold January evening in wartime Bradford. Of course, the names meant little to me then, and I knew nothing about the finer points of ballet dancing, but I can clearly remember how Fonteyn seemed to light up the stage whenever she appeared on it, and Helpman's performances were simply rivetting. My programme for Delibes "Coppelia" is the only one to survive from those Sadler's Wells Ballet Company visits, but I'm pretty certain that I also saw them do "Swan Lake" and

"Giselle", although my memories of those occasions have been overwritten by later performances, and there must have been evenings devoted to shorter works, such as "Les (perennial) Sylphides", because I can vividly recall the impact made on me by Helpman in one such piece.

This was a ballet version of Shakespeare's "Hamlet", choreographed, if I remember rightly, by Helpman himself (but possibly Bronislava Nijinska) to the music of Tchaikovsky's Fantasy-Overture, Opus 67, of the same name, thus requiring the entire plot of Hamlet to be encompassed within the space of just under twenty minutes, so lots of hard miming was involved, but the ballet opened with a remarkable coup de theatre. It was achieved by raising the curtain on a completely darkened stage, and then, to the accompaniment of the opening drum roll crescendo, beaming a single narrow spotlight onto the pallid, *inverted* face of Helpman/Hamlet, suspended, apparently, in mid-air. There was barely time to realise that this effect had been achieved by positioning Helpman flat on his back on the shoulders of four black-clad pall-bears with his head hung down backwards towards the audience, before the apparition moved rapidly away, in step with the eight descending bass clef chords with which Tchaikovsky opens the proceedings proper. This startling preview of the aftermath to Hamlet's death was repeated, once the events leading up to it had been portrayed, in its rightful place at the end of the ballet.

What a pity my programme for that performance hasn't survived. The programme for "Coppelia" shows, incidentally, that Franz was danced by Alexis Rassiné, the orchestra was conducted by Constant Lambert, and, buried in the ranks of the corps de ballet, there is the name of Moira Shearer. The programme also states that "OXO will be served during the Interval. Kindly place your order with the attendant" and displays the obligatory AIR RAID WARNING NOTICE which reads "In the event of an Air Raid Warning being received during the performance, the audience will be informed at once from the stage. It should be remembered that the warning does not necessarily mean that a raid will take place and that in any case it is not likely to occur for at least five minutes. Anyone who desires to leave the theatre may do so but the performance will continue, and patrons are advised in their own interests to remain in the building".

Just as the temporary displacement of the Sadler's Wells Opera Company from its London home had led me to welcome the Royal Carl Rosa Opera Company when it too came along, so this visit by

the Sadler's Wells Ballet prepared the way for the later arrival at the Alhambra of another touring company called the International Ballet, about whom I know nothing more than my recollections of their performances can add to such information as can be gleaned from the three programmes of their performances which have somehow survived. The prima ballerina was a little lady called Mona Inglesby, whose sad-faced, but very correct performances contrasted well with those of the other female star, the more elegant and fiery Nina Tarakanova. The leading male, Harold Turner, possessed a striking masculine physique and impressed me greatly with his use of it, while the male character roles were played by Leslie French, well-known as a Shakespearean comic actor at the time.

These programmes were made up of four short pieces, such as "Les Sylphides", "Carnaval", "Swan Lake (Act II)", and "The Dances from Prince Igor", with one exception, when, after "Les Sylphides", they put on a two act ballet version of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night", music by Grieg, choreography by Andree Howard, with Leslie French in the part of Feste. There were two other curiosities, both of a comic nature. One was a "Humorous Ballet in Two Acts" entitled "Planetomania", music Norman Demuth, choreography Mona Inglesby, in which she cast herself as "Charlotte, an observant maid of plain countenance" opposite Leslie French's "Adam (a scientist)", and Tarakanova as the goddess Venus, with Turner playing Adonis. The second comic ballet was called "Adam and Eve and Ferdinand", music by Ernest Irvine, no choreographer mentioned, with a cast featuring Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel, Ferdinand (a snake), and a bevy of Cave Girls. It was even more far-fetched and farcical than the first, and quite unmemorable, but these pieces opened my eyes to the hitherto unsuspected comedic possibilities of ballet and gave the dancers a chance to show us a different side of their artistic personalities. As both these pieces were sandwiched together between "Swan Lake (Act II)" and the "Dances from Prince Igor" which brought the evening to a rousing conclusion, there was little to complain about.

[More than sixty years later, on October 14, 2006 to be precise, I was astonished to discover, from a lengthy obituary in the Sydney Morning Herald, reprinted from the Telegraph, London, that there was much, much more to Mona Inglesby, who had died at the age of 88, than had been apparent to me at the time. She was born Mona Vrendenburg, the daughter of Dutch entrepreneur settled in England, but danced under her mother's maiden name after studying under Marie Rambert in London and exiled members

of the Imperial Russian ballerinas in Paris. At the age of 21, while working as a volunteer ambulance driver in the early days of WW2, she decided that she could do more for the war effort by forming a ballet company to tour the country and borrowed enough money from her father to do so. She launched the International Ballet in spring 1940 with 40 dancers, including several from the Rambert and Sadlers Wells Companies, and soon paid back the loan, and, for the next 13 years took classical ballet to the biggest theatres and cinemas in Britain, and even to Butlin's Holiday Camps, giving the inaugural performance at the new Royal Festival Hall in 1951. The company prided itself on being "the only unit of its size in the world to present ballet consistently without adding to the taxpayers' burden." Her other claim to fame was that she played a pivotal role in acquiring and preserving the notations of the entire repertoire of the Russian Imperial Ballet, most of it created by the great choreographer Marius Petipa, which had been smuggled out of the country following the Revolution. Of little apparent interest to anyone else at the time, these records were subsequently to enable the post-communist Kirov Ballet to reconstruct and perform "The Sleeping Beauty" in its original form to worldwide acclaim, and "during a London tour in 2000 the reconstructors visited Inglesby...in a care home in Bexhill on Sea to thank her for saving these crucial texts of ballet history, though she was too frail to see a performance".]

As for me, by now a committed hedonist, determined to cultivate my aesthetic sensibilities to the fullest possible extent, I strove to supplement the insights gained from my visits to both the opera and ballet by devouring any printed matter I could lay my hands on that might improve my appreciation of these and any future such experiences. Fortunately, in spite of wartime restrictions, Penguin Books had recently begun publishing their admirably cheap Pelican Specials and these included "Opera" by Edward Dent, and "Ballet" by Arnold Haskell, both of which I acquired in 1943. Amazingly, considering the wartime quality of the paper, the latter is still in my possession, its tattered cover proudly proclaiming "The first COMPLETE GUIDE to BALLET and for the price of a theatre programme; its history, its theory, notes on the leading personalities and creators of modern Ballet, studies of individual ballets and of some contemporary dancers..." Among these last I found Margot Fonteyn "...the first ballerina to be produced by the National Ballet at Sadler's Wells...ideally built, an essentially intelligent dancer with rare musicality. She has progressed from a slow, dreamy, eternal Sylphide mood into an intensity of

attack that has opened to her every role in the classical repertoire."; Robert Helpman "...would be an outstanding artist at any period...incapable of making an ungraceful movement. Perfectly musical, he is a perfect partner, for partnering is a question of ear as well as of strength and good manners. His range is enormous: classical, romantic, broad farce, or subtle comedy. He shares with Massine alone the ultimate secret of true art in dancing, the ability to give positive value to a static pose."; and Harold Turner "...a magnificent technician and a truly virile personality, an example to the majority of young dancers...a classical dancer of the old type...the true premier danseur, brilliant rather than lyrical, but he has a wide enough range to be excellent in character and broad comedy. Such an artist illustrates better than anyone my remarks (elsewhere) on male dancing, and should do much to remove the national prejudice against male dancers."

That final sentence is a telling reflection on contemporary mores. Of the other dancers I had seen, Nina Tarakanova is credited with "charm and personality, which she is inclined to substitute for technique", but no reference is made, alas, to either Mona Inglesby, or the International Ballet Company. These ancient comments by Arnold Haskell are reproduced here because they tended to confirm the impressions these dancers had made upon my own untutored eye, and encourage my critical interest in ballet, although this never amounted to the passion I was later to develop for opera.

But it was upon the concert hall that my serious interest was focussed at that time, and I saw these intermittent incursions into opera and ballet, however welcome, as merely icing on a musical cake made up of two main layers. The most important of these was my regular attendance at the Bradford Subscription Concerts mounted monthly on Saturday afternoons from October to March at the Eastbrook Hall. The 1942-43 season (the seventy-eighth, this admirable institution having originated in 1866) consisted of six concerts by the Manchester-based Halle Orchestra. For some reason, the Halle had been without a resident conductor for quite a while, and relied entirely on a stable of guest conductors, who, that season, included a most illustrious pair, Sir Henry Wood, and Sir Adrian Boult. Since the soloists were pianists Solomon, Moiseiwitsch and Clifford Curzon, and violinists Ida Haendel, Eda Kersey and Henry Holst, all of them names to conjure with at the time, these concerts were very substantial affairs with hardly an empty seat in the house.

One of their most notable features, particularly in retrospect, was the availability at each concert of the Analytical Programme Notes, price sixpence. At a time when wartime restrictions had reduced the programmes at the Prince's and the Alhambra to a single flimsy folded sheet, these publications must have represented a very considerable achievement on somebody's part. My surviving programme for the fifth concert of that season (February 27th) runs to fourteen pages of text (numbered 66 to 79 to enable them to be bound in sequence with the notes for the other concerts in the season) lavishly interspersed with musical illustrations. Even the Overture (Schubert's "Rosamunde") merits five musical quotes, while the Brahms Violin Concerto gets fourteen, and the first piece after the interval, the Symphony No.1, Op.10, by one Dmitri Shostakovitch, a composer I had never heard of until then, has nine quotes, some of them running to several lines of stave. Although, at this point in the war, the music of our Russian allies was being extensively featured in concert programmes at the expense of that of our German foes, it says something for the artistic standards of those subscription concerts that they should feature a work by a living foreign composer only fifteen years after its first performance.

The conductor, on this occasion, was Leslie Heward, by permission of the City of Birmingham Orchestra whose musical director he had been since 1930. A local boy, born in nearby Liversedge, he was now only forty-six years old but this was to be his last Bradford concert before he died three months later. He must have been quite ill when he gave it, because I can still remember the difficulty he obviously experienced in climbing the narrow curving stairs which were the only way up to the podium after emerging from the ground-floor vestry underneath. For all its size and importance to the cultural life of Bradford, the Eastbrook Hall was still the giant Methodist Chapel it had been designed to be. The podium, replacing the pulpit, and elevated about ten feet above ground floor level, was surrounded by the stepped up stages where the choir stalls had been, and on which were now precariously perched the various sections of the orchestra, overshadowed by the massive pipes of the biggest organ in Bradford. It may have been a bit of an ordeal for the instrumentalists, but I have no reason to believe that the acoustics of this intimate, but light, spacious and airy hall were in any way deficient.

Although he didn't conduct any of its concerts that season, it was during 1942 that John Barbirolli, who was to conduct the Halle at all the future Subscription Concerts I attended, appeared on the scene. I know this because the programme has survived of a concert he gave with the London Symphony Orchestra sometime in May-June somewhere in Bradford, probably the Eastbrook Hall. Being the usual wartime single folded sheet produced to serve on what might be a number of different occasions, this document is short on specific information. It gives no date other than May-June 1942 and names no venue, but states on the front that the concert is "...given under the auspices of the Carnegie Trust" and on the back that "The Directors of the London Symphony Orchestra are deeply indebted to Mr. John Barbirolli for his magnificent gesture in conducting this series of concerts without remuneration." One can only speculate about the sequence of events which had led to this sudden reappearance in our midst of a conductor who, a few years earlier, had leapt from obscurity in Glasgow to world fame by taking over the baton of New York Philharmonic Orchestra when Arturo Toscanini finally relinquished it.

It seems possible that Barbirolli's New York appointment, though well deserved on merit (as his subsequent career was to prove), was an outcome of the internal power politics of the American music establishment which left the noses of certain influential members of it out of joint, and that a loose conspiracy of these disaffected individuals made life sufficiently uncomfortable for Barbirolli, in spite of his undoubted success with the public, for him to see a return to wartime England as both a patriotic duty and a happier option. Whatever the reason, New York's loss was the North of England's gain because his effect upon Halle Orchestra at those Subscription Concerts which he conducted and I attended for the next three seasons, was quite electric. His diminutive body and big, birdlike head with its curtain of hair round those lustrous eyes, gave him a Napoleonic presence which simply dominated the Eastbrook Hall.

And how he loved to play up to the audience, if only by having a good look round them after making his entrance, and watching ostentatiously while any unfortunate stragglers found their seats, as they were allowed to do after the National Anthem had invariably been played. At the first concert of his first season, after seeing off Weber's "Oberon" Overture and taking a bow, he fiddled around with the scores on his desk for a while, then turned round and leaned over the podium rail to ask the front row of the audience below, which work he was supposed to

be conducting next. After recovering from their surprise, they somehow managed to tell him that it was the Five Variants of "Dives and Lazarus" by Vaughan Williams, followed by the Symphonic Fragments from "Daphnis and Chloe" by Ravel, rather than the other way round. What a showman!

Even that earlier, unremunerated, concert with the London Symphony Orchestra bore the stamp of his individuality. Not only was it an All German programme at a time when we were still losing the war, but, after the respectable Beethoven's "Egmont" Overture and Seventh Symphony, the second half was devoted entirely to the music of Richard Wagner, who I had recently seen described in a book by Stefan Zweig as "The Founder of the Germany of Adolf Hitler", comprising the Prelude and Liebestod from "Tristan and Isolde", (a gramophone record of which I immediately went out and bought), the so-called "Forest Murmurs" from "Siegfried". and the Overture to "Tannhauser". Quite a statement to make about our common ownership of the music of a nation with whom we were currently engaged in a fight to the death. My seven surviving Programme Notes from his three subsequent seasons of Subscription Concerts show some quite adventurous inclusions, such as the Delius Violin and Cello Concerto, Stravinsky's "Firebird" (another record purchase), and Martinu's First Symphony, but the programme for the piece I remember best from those concerts has not, alas, survived. Barbirolli's performance of Gustav Mahler's "Song of Earth" left me stunned with admiration, although it would be many years before concert programming (and long play gramophone records) allowed me to follow this up by exploring Mahler's other works.

But these were not the only orchestral concerts it was given to me to attend in Bradford during those wartime years, nor, as it turned out, was the Eastbrook Hall the only venue capable of hosting such events, although it was not without a certain amount of surprise that my friend and I found ourselves embedded, once again, in the human wall in t'Gods at the Princess Theatre, gazing down, this time, on a stage which supported the tiered ranks of a full symphony orchestra. This was during "Bradford's International Music Week, presented by Harold Fielding" in December 1942, when the fortunes of war (assisted by considerable entrepreneurial ingenuity and, possibly, a government grant) had brought the Bournemouth Philharmonic Orchestra from the depths of winter in a seaside town on the south coast of England (now, of course, the front line in the war with Germany), to the hospitable bosom of a crowded Prince's Theatre, where, with true wartime spirit, they

gave *eight* concerts in six days, starting 6.15pm every evening from Monday to Saturday, and 2.30pm on Thursday and Saturday.

My one surviving programme from this bonanza relates to the Wednesday evening, devoted entirely to Tschaikovsky and conducted by Dr. Malcolm Sargent. This was my first encounter with "Flash Harry" (as he later came to be called by the groundlings at the Albert Hall Promenade Concerts) of whom I became a lasting admirer (and never saw any conductor of his generation handle a choir better). The programme consisted of the March Slav, the B flat minor Piano Concerto, with the ubiquitous Solomon as soloist, and the Fourth Symphony. Information on the back of the programme reveals that the following night was all Beethoven, with Anatole Fistoulari conducting, and Solomon again soloing in my beloved "Emperor" Concerto - what power and stamina the man had!. Three other concerts featured piano duetists Rawicz and Landauer, who were famously popular at the time, but of more interest to me now is that two of these were conducted by one Reginald Goodall, who must surely be he, who, thirty years later, was significantly to improve the quality of my life by his conducting of, first, Wagner's "Mastersingers" and then, his complete Ring cycle for the English National Opera at the Coliseum - a far cry from the concerts he gave on that occasion, one of which featured Rawicz and Landauer "in a special arrangement of the music from Walt Disney's greatest triumph SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS", and somebody called Piccaver in "well-known songs and arias".

Given my age and relative inexperience, I cannot vouch for the quality of the performances I witnessed during that extraordinary week at the Prince's Theatre, but I do know that, of all the many concerts I have attended since, there have been few I enjoyed more. After the cool, clear, sacramental spaces of the Eastbrook Hall, the physical immediacy of the orchestra, piled up on the stage below us in the darkened little theatre, made for fully focussed attention and concentration of a truly transcendental order. Seeing every move the musicians made, hearing every note they played, I could feel my comprehension of the inner workings of that great musical machine growing exponentially as I watched. But my deepening appreciation of the music I heard at these performances was due largely to the enlightenment I was gaining, in the spaces between concert-going, from the steady diet of classical music on gramophone records being fed to me by my friend and colleague in the staff room of the X Ray Department at the Bradford Royal Infirmary. This was the second layer in my musical cake.

Since my friend's record collection reflected his remarkable mind rather than his unremarkable appearance, there was little in it of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms, whose works, he pointed out, were well enough represented in the concerts broadcast by the BBC to leave him free to invest in composers held in lower regard by the musical establishment of the time, such as Berlioz, Tchaikovsky, Richard Strauss and Sibelius. In those days, classical music was still seen, to some extent, as the province of an elite who had been brought up with access to it and could afford to attend concerts regularly, and there was a distinct bias among this class of person in favour of the symphonic form as the most elevated state to which music could aspire, and any composer whose works were judged to be deficient in this respect, or insufficiently rigorous in pursuit of it, was regarded as second rate. An additional anathema was reserved for those whose compositions were sufficiently tuneful to be dismissed as "popular", so Tchaikovsky, with his three symphonies, two concertos, three full-length ballets, two operas (one of them a true masterwork), and sundry chamber pieces still regularly performed, was excluded from the top table on both counts.

But not from my friend's collection, which was strongly inclined towards the more colourful orchestral outpourings of the so-called Romantic movement. In addition to Tchaikovsky's 5th and 6th, and Sibelius's 1st and 2nd Symphonies, there was a Richard Strauss tone poem "Till Eulenspiegel' Merry Pranks", and even George Gershwin's Concerto in F, but a particular favourite of those late night sessions in the X Ray Department was Berlioz's "Fantastic Symphony". This revolutionary work, written in 1828, only a year after the death of Beethoven, and five years before Brahms was born, when Wagner was a mere 25 years old, pointed a way ahead for the symphony which took, via Liszt, more than half a century to come to fruition in Tchaikovsky, and, after him, Mahler and Bruckner. The "Symphonie Fantastique" occupies a special place in my affections because I got to know it better than any piece of classical music I had previously heard. This was due to the fact that my companion introduced me to a version of it, the like of which I had never previously encountered - the full orchestral score.

Naturally, I was overwhelmed by the prospect at first, because, although I had, since returning to Bradford, learned to play the

clarinet and saxophone well enough to form a dance band (in which my friend also played violin and saxophone), my ability to read even a single line of music was still underdeveloped, but, to my own amazement, under my friend's careful tutelage, and with regular practice, I soon found myself able to follow, initially, the first violins, who usually have the most to do, without getting lost, and then the other parts in more and more detail. It was a remarkable experience to undergo barely two years after going out into the world as a musical ignoramus, and it marked a sort of watershed in my development. It was as if I had been initiated into a secret organisation from which I could never be expelled, and although I never achieved the kind of mastery enjoyed by those gifted few who can sight read a full score in the same way that the rest of us can read a play and reconstitute it in the theatre of the mind, I became perceptive enough, eventually, to be able to "see" things buried in the undergrowth of the musical landscape unrolling before me on the page, which I had hitherto failed to hear.

From this point onward, my musical horizons would continue to expand, my tastes to develop, and my confidence in them to grow, but in this, as in so many other things in life, opportunity would count for more than the ability to take advantage of it. Fortunately for me, in spite of the war (or because of it, perhaps) opportunities continued to present themselves from the most unlikely sources on a broad cultural front.

4

With the tide of war finally turning in favour of the Allies, another stroke of luck saw me sent to a distant London I could otherwise never have hoped to visit, to undertake a two-week study course which turned out to be sufficiently undemanding to enable me to familiarise myself with some of the capital's many attractions. Armed with this knowledge, and thanks to the cheap bed and breakfast accommodation available at the Central YMCA in Great Russell Street W1, I was then able to organise subsequent visits for my own delectation. And what delights there were to be discovered by a provincial lad in wartime London, teeming as it was with off-duty servicemen foraging for the entertainment, of which, towards the end of the war, there was an amazingly generous supply, inhibited only by the sporadic arrival of Hitler's secret weapons, first, the V1 flying bombs, and then, the V2 rockets.

My first visit under my own steam was made in the company of a like-minded pal, and it spanned a truly memorable seven days during which we contrived to take in no less than fourteen different shows of one kind and another. We achieved this feat by careful planning and lots of legwork, having discovered that there was invariably one matinee performance per week of all the productions we wished to attend, and that enough of them fell on different days from Monday to Saturday to enable us, with orchestral concerts on Sunday afternoon and evening, to fit fourteen of them in. The legwork was not simply to get us from theatre to theatre and back to one of Joe Lyons' Corner Houses for affordable food in between, but to obtain the tickets in the first place, since these were invariably for the cheapest seats which were often available only at the theatre on the day of the performance. There was no opera, of course, and only a limited amount of ballet, consisting of scratch companies performing extracts from major works as divertissements on a bare stage, but there was enough topnotch theatre to keep my friend and me fully entrained. I know that we attended a performance of "Hamlet" at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket with John Gielgud in the lead and Peggy Ashcroft as Ophelia, because the programme has survived, but I also know that Laurence Olivier, and Ralph Richardson. and Co. were running a sort of super rep. at the New Theatre, St. Martin's Lane which devoted one evening to a double bill featuring Olivier as both the king in Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex", and Mr Puff in Sheridan's "The Critic", and another to Rostand's "Cyrano de Bergerac" played by Richardson, because we were present on both occasions, and, need I say it, deeply impressed.

There was also the Royal Albert Hall, whose acquaintance I had made on my first visit to London, and where I was destined to spend more of my spare time, over the next sixty years, than in any other single place of entertainment, with the possible exception of the London Coliseum after the Sadler's Wells Opera had become the English National Opera and made it their permanent home. German bombs had ensured that the Albert Hall was the only concert hall of any size left standing in London, although, until its notorious echo had been eliminated by the installation of those inverted mushrooms in the roof, it enjoyed a very poor reputation among the musical cognoscenti of the capital. But that didn't bother me. Deeply impressed by its size and faded grandeur - and the cheapness of the seats - I fell in love with it at first sight and have continued to patronise it whenever I find myself within reach of London, which is not very often these days, alas.

[Only one programme from those wartime visits has survived - Sunday afternoon, 11th March, 1945, Sir Adrian Boult conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra with Iso Elinson soloing in Brahms' Piano Concerto No.2, other items being Mozart's Haffner Symphony and Elgar's Enigma Variations - it consists of the usual wartime single folded sheet, but the analytical notes by Edwin Evans are quite thorough, if a little compressed. One curiosity is that, at the bottom of the front page, above "Programme and Notes 6d" appears the legend SMOKING - CIGARETTES ONLY, a reminder that, in those days, everyone smoked everywhere, even during concerts at the Albert Hall, unless expressly forbidden to do so.]

Shortly afterwards, the war ended, and, all too soon after that, I was obliged to exchange my life of pleasure in Bradford for the uncertainties of the outside world, beginning with two years' National Service in the army, and, from that point onwards, for the next twenty five years, I had to take my pleasures, including opera, where I could find them (if I could afford them), fortunate only in having a musical education to draw upon whenever an opportunity to do so presented itself. During most of that time, orchestral concerts and stage plays were sporadically accessible and affordable, but opera much less so, although it may be of interest to note that, shortly after my call-up, while still within reach of London, before being posted abroad, I actually found myself dancing on the stage of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and even singing, if only sotto voce, into the ear of my fair dancing partner. This remarkable performance was made possible by the fact that, during the war, that hallowed hall had been converted into a palais de dance by covering the auditorium over at the same level as the stage to create a dance floor extending from the back of the stalls to the back of the stage, an ingenious arrangement marred only by a small, but disconcertingly perceptible change in the level of the floor when dancing from the ex-stage to the ex-auditorium and back again through the proscenium arch.

It was to be some time after the war before "grand opera" resurfaced in London, but the vacuum was partly filled by Sadler's Wells Opera Company returning to their old home in Rosebury Avenue, EC1, shortly after VE Day with the premier of Benjamin Britten's stunning debut as an opera composer, "Peter Grimes" - a bombshell which, although it would change the face of opera in England for ever, was not received with universal acclaim at the time, and I have to admit that, on first

acquaintance, I found the contemporary idiom rather difficult to get to grips with. Repeated exposure to it since, however, has led me to the conclusion that it is the most thoroughly satisfactory tragic opera created since World War One. It has everything going for it - a credible plot with plenty of action, protagonists who are all too human, an assortment of colourful minor characters embedded in a chorus which is itself a protagonist, all firmly wedded to music of unfailing invention, enormous range, and fascinating detail to produce a total effect which could not be achieved by anything else but an opera.

"Peter Grimes" was an astonishing achievement for a first opera by a young composer, and one that Britten never quite equalled with his subsequent operas, good as they were. In spite of its modern idiom and *verismo* libretto, it is curiously old fashioned in featuring tunes which one can actually leave the theatre humming. It also has, in Grimes, the most ambiguous "hero" since Don Giovanni. I was fortunate enough to see it in its original form at the Sadler's Wells Theatre, shortly after my demob, during a window of opportunity presented by a two year appointment at a hospital in Reading which put London within easy reach by rail. For most of that time, my fiancée was living in Chelsea and I was shuttling up and down to Paddington station on cheap day return tickets, sometimes four times a week, in what was to be a last self-indulgent fling before assuming the responsibilities of a husband and father, and I was doubly blessed in that the second of those years was 1951 - Festival of Britain year.

It was a wonderful time to be in London with so much high quality entertainment about. There were financial constraints, of course, but good seats could be obtained cheaply by judicious advance booking - mostly, however, in my case, for plays and concerts (some of the latter at the brand new Festival Hall, of course), because, although opera was available, I found it, by comparison, relatively inaccessible. At Covent Garden, now back in business, the seats obtainable in advance of the day were painfully expensive, but I was persuaded by my ill-fated attempt to acquaint myself with "Tristan and Isolde" on the cheap, to splash out on better seats for a performance of "La Traviata", the details of which, alas, have not survived. It was my first full frontal encounter with "grand opera" and the opulence of the production quite bowled me over - the sets, the costumes, the chorus and the orchestra, were all of a different order from those I had experienced at the Keighley Hippodrome, nine years earlier, and the playing and singing were beyond reproach.

But the words, alas, were in Italian, and my inability to understand them prevented me from immersing myself in the Covent Garden Violetta's world to anything like the same extent as that of the Keighley Hippodrome Violetta, with the result that a persistent feeling of frustration clouded my enjoyment of the performance as a whole, leaving behind the realisation that, in future, I would be wise to invest my meagre resources only in opera sung in English. Of which, of course, there was plenty available at Sadler's Wells, but the problem there was the relative inconvenience of getting to the theatre. I was still, in effect, a provincial visitor, and my familiarity with London was restricted to the West End and South Kensington, using the Tube network. Sadler's Wells Theatre was in Islington which, although in EC1, seemed a long way out to me, and the nearest Tube station to it was a couple of streets away, making my journey back to Reading, via Paddington, after the performance rather complicated. Also, there was a lot of competition for my custom, at the time, from theatres and concert halls within easier reach.

These obstacles notwithstanding, I journeyed out to Rosebury Avenue on no less than four occasions during this period, although none of the programme notes for these performances has survived. In addition to his "Peter Grimes" already mentioned, I saw Britten's second opera "The Rape of Lucretia" which I found rather uninvolving, due less, I think, to its smaller scale (which worked well enough for me later in "The Turn of the Screw"), than to its fairly predictable plot and sermonising libretto. A bit too formulaic, I thought, but (my personal bottom line!) worth another visit if ever possible. Much better value for money was Leos Janacek's amazing "Katya Kabanova", performed by Sadler's Wells for the first time in Britain. Like most of my fellow countrymen, I had never heard of the Czech composer until then, but I took him to my heart immediately and have never missed an opportunity to attend any of his operas since, nor to buy recordings of his other works once I could afford them.

Janacek was a phenomenon - a genuine original whose musical idiom seems to have had neither antecedents nor progeny. The only comparison that springs to mind is with those buildings in Barcelona by the Spanish architect Gaudi, crossing innovation with tradition, and the alien with the familiar, to unique effect. The warmth of Janacek's personality radiates from everything he wrote, and his unconventional outlook on life is

reflected in some of the subjects he chose for his operas, but it was to be a long time after meeting "Katya Kabanova" before I would enjoy live performances of "Jenufa", "Osud", "A Cunning Little Vixen", "The Makroupolos Case", "From the House of the Dead", and "The Adventures of Mr. Broucek" - a treasure trove waiting to be discovered.

My final expedition to Sadler's Wells was for a performance of Puccini's "Tosca", eventually to become one of my very favourite operas, but marred for me, on this occasion, by finding the part of the desirable diva filled (to overflowing) by a large lady with ginger hair, and that of her ardent lover by a slender young man with a rather tentative stage presence, neither of whose names I can recall. What I do remember, however, is the impression made upon me by the rendition of Scarpia's powerful aria, "Go, Tosca", at the end of the first act, by a baritone who, if my memory serves me correctly, was the same John Hargreaves I had first encountered as Figaro nearly ten years earlier. This is one of Puccini's most accomplished pieces of operatic architecture, superimposing Scarpia's malevolent soliloquy, to dramatic effect, on a Te Deum sung by the church choir, punctuated by tolling bells, and the ominous booming of a bass drum, and it certainly succeeded in giving me an authentic operatic experience that evening.

Following the appearance of this impressive Scarpia, I found the rest of the opera sufficiently absorbing to resolve to make its closer acquaintance, with the other parts more suitably cast, at the earliest possible opportunity, little realising that I would have to wait 25 years to do so. And this was not entirely due to my being otherwise engaged elsewhere for most of that period, since Tosca was not such a fixture in the operatic repertoires as La Boheme and Madame Butterfly in those days, and it took the sensational Zeffereilli production at Covent Garden in 1964 with Maria Callas as Tosca and Tito Gobbi as Scarpia to raise its popularity index. Too hard an act to follow, perhaps, because I don't think the opera was staged again in London until 1976. Fortunately, by this time, I was living and working in the vicinity, and had become a regular patron of the English National Opera whose production of it, at the Coliseum in February of that year, was quickly overshadowed by a revival of the Zeffereilli spectacular at Covent Garden starring Luciano Pavarotti as Cavaradossi. By this time, after attending the ENO's version twice, so taken was I with Tosca, that I broke with tradition and went to a performance of the Covent Garden production in April '77.

Callas had been replaced by Raina Kabaivanska, and Tito Gobbi by Peter Glossop, so it wasn't quite the experience it might have been, but Pavarotti was in good form, and, for much of the time, the performance succeeded in transcending the language barrier to a sufficient extent to nourish my growing conviction that "Tosca" can lay serious claim to being the most convincing tragic opera ever conceived. Unlike so many of its competitors, it features totally credible characters, embedded in a factual historical context, and running true to their natures throughout; its equally credible plot is driven by their reactions to the sudden intrusion of the fugitive Angelotti into their lives, and progresses, in less than 24 hours, from its golden beginnings to the darkest of conclusions, with Puccini's music wringing every drop of emotion from it each step of the way. But only, in my view, if you can follow the words - not just the gist of them, but the actual words - which isn't easy, even when they are being sung in English.

Tosca's famous Act II aria, for example, (*Vissi d'arte* - "Love and music, these have I lived for") is more than just a lament about the humiliation she is about to suffer. It's the moral turning point of the plot. As she contemplates the collapse of her world and the predicament which Scarpia has blackmailed her into, the devoutly religious Tosca wonders how this can possibly have happened to her. She has lived for love and music, never harmed anyone, given help where it is needed, prayed at all the right shrines, done everything she could to deserve Heaven's blessing, and *this is how God has rewarded her*. Faced with this betrayal, she summons up the resolve to bargain with Scarpia, then, taking matters into her own hands, uses the knife with which he has been eating his supper to stab him to death as he comes to force himself upon her. There are few more satisfying moments in opera.

Similarly, in Cavaradossi's equally famous Act III aria (*E lucivan le stelle* - "The stars were brightly shining") the words are even more affecting than the sad circumstances of their singing. Facing imminent execution by firing squad, Cavaradossi has begged pen and paper from his jailer to write a last letter to his beloved Tosca, but finds himself overtaken instead by erotic memories of their lovers' meetings under the stars when she "unveiled her beauty", and is seized with regret at having to leave the life he loves so much. No histrionics of a soul-searching nature, nothing about the artworks left uncreated. It's a short aria in a short last act, which Puccini has

resisted any temptation to pad out to a greater length. In fact, the whole opera, from the moment Cavaradossi encounters Angelotti in the Attavanti Chapel, is driven along at a cracking pace without a single superfluous flourish.

Little of this was brought home to me, needless to say, by that first encounter at Sadler's Wells, but the promise of it was discernable, and lasted through the intervening years, which were filled to overflowing with the distractions of career and family. My two years in Reading were followed by two years in Nottingham, where I got married, then two years back in Keighley, where our daughter was born, then, after a career switch into the pharmaceutical industry, five years working in Leeds, followed by a move to Head Office, first in London and then in Basingstoke, with a year, in between, in Sydney, Australia, where our son was born. We finally settled in Fleet, Hampshire, where, when not behind an office desk, or out on business trips at home and abroad, I swung as wildly through the 60s with my wife and our circle of friends as time and circumstance allowed. It was a life leaving few opportunities for operagoing, or even concertgoing, although the invention of the hifi stereo gramophone and the long playing record made it possible for me to start collecting music to enjoy at home.

Two other factors influenced my choice of leisure activities during this period. The first was that, although we had much in common, my wife did not share my passion for either serious music or opera. She was not actually averse to them, but, coming from a similar background to myself, had received no musical education worthy of the name, and had felt no urge to acquire one. On the other hand, her response to the visual world was much more appreciative than mine, and her talents in that direction led to her eventually becoming an accomplished amateur painter. The second factor was that, for most of those years, we had very little money to spare for personal indulgences of any kind. Once we had taken out a mortgage on our first home in Keighley, and the birth of our daughter had deprived my wife of her earning power, we were on a very tight budget indeed, and any available slack had to be spent on pleasures we could both enjoy. In addition to which, on the rare occasions when an affordable opportunity to pursue my musical interests did occur, I had some difficulty in finding anyone in my immediate circle to share it with me. This was not an obstacle, of course, but it was, I found, an added discouragement.

So, whenever my wife and I went to the theatre, it was as playgoers - first, at the Nottingham Playhouse, and, later, the Grand Theatre, Leeds - although I did contrive to fit in a few orchestral concerts at the Leeds Town Hall, where, thanks to the generous Government subsidies being dished out to the performing arts in those days, seats were available at bargain prices. [In March 1959, for example, my ticket for a performance, by the Halle Orchestra under Sir John Barbirolli, with the Halle Choir, Victoria Elliot, and Eugenia Zareska, of Gustav Mahler's massive Symphony No. 2 ("The Resurrection") for which the sixpenny programme notes, by Ernest Bradbury, ran to seven pages and included fifteen musical examples and the full text in German and English, cost me two shillings.] But I can recall attending only three operatic performances in all that time.

The most memorable of these was the 1960 Sadler's Wells production of Igor Stravinsky's "Oedipus Rex" which I was fortunate enough to see at the Bradford Alhambra when it was on tour. And what a treat it was! The opera packs a substantial punch in its own right, of course, but the Michael St Dennis staging with Abd'Elkader Farrah's designs turned my first encounter with it into an absolute knockout. I afterwards bought (and still have) the LP recording of the production, issued by EMI in 1963, but my familiarity with it did not prevent me from enjoying the whole thing again when Sadler's Wells revived it at the London Coliseum in 1972. It was paired off, in Bradford, with Puccini's "Il Tabarro", which left little impression on me in comparison, but, at the Coliseum, with another much loved modern masterpiece, Bela Bartok's "Duke Bluebeard's Castle". It would have been a marriage made in heaven but for the rather disappointing production of the latter by Glen Byam Shaw - no windowless castle, no opening doors, just a metal ladder hanging from the flies, and a lot of psychologising. It was my first encounter (but not, unfortunately, my last) with a production which, in attempting to impose a modern interpretation on an already allegorical original, succeeded only in diluting its emotional impact.

I had no reservations about the production values of the second opera I attended during those years. It was a performance of Puccini's "La Boheme" at the Grand Theatre, Leeds, of which, again, no printed record has survived, but which my memory tells me was given in the early 1960's by a Royal Opera House (?) touring company, singing in English, unlikely as that now seems, even to me. But I can clearly remember quite a lavish production which portrayed the activities in and around the Cafe

Momus in the second act more convincingly than in any live performance I have witnessed before or since. The whole act is another masterpiece of musical architecture on Puccini's part, interweaving the diverse elements of a crowded Parisian street scene with vocal exchanges between a large cast of characters, and culminating in Musetta's famous aria and Marcello's passionate response to it. A difficult sequence to render convincingly, I imagine - and expensive, too. Which may explain why the opera has attracted the sort of cheap productions which purport to give 'contemporary relevance' to the story by portraying the bohemians as trendy students snorting coke in a seedy squat, and boozing in a back-alley bar, but which leave the presence, in Act Three, of the morning crowd of workers waiting for the gates of Paris to be opened rather difficult to explain.

The last of my "provincial" operas was all the more enjoyable for being completely unexpected. In March 1970, on an overnight business trip to Tyneside, casting around for something to do in the evening, I was surprised to discover that there was to be a performance of Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" at, of all unlikely places, the Empire Theatre, Sunderland. I hurried across there to find that the Basilica Opera Company, of whom I had never heard, were, that week, presenting, not only "Madame Butterfly" (Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday), but also "Il Trovatore" (Tuesday and Thursday), and "Hansel and Gretel" (Schools Matinees only - Wednesday and Thursday) with the help of "Sadler's Wells and Covent Garden Artists, the North East Opera Chorus (25 strong - all names supplied), and the Manchester Sinfonia Orchestra (40 strong - all names supplied)", and that, thanks to the generosity of the Sunderland Corporation and the Northern Arts Association, excellent seats for the performance were available at ridiculously low prices. In spite of which, when the curtain went up, the place was half empty.

The performance deserved a more substantial audience. Sung with admirable clarity and conviction in English, against an equally convincing set, it was more successful in weaving Puccini's magic spell around me for its entire length than any I had previously encountered, and the equal of any I have attended since. Butterfly was sung by Angela Rubini, Pinkerton by Ramon Remedios (brother of the Alberto I was to see so much of at the London Coliseum), Suzuki by Marjory McMichael, and Sharples by Malcolm Rivers, and I could find no fault with the production. What a stroke of luck! And more good fortune was soon to come my way, because I was standing, that evening, on the threshold

of a new life in which opera would be allowed to play a much larger part than hitherto, since, a few weeks earlier, to the astonishment of many, including myself, a most unlikely train of events (the details of which need not concern us here) had parachuted me directly into the upper reaches of Her Majesty's Civil Service, and esconced me in Whitehall, London, for the rest of my working life.

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In contrast to the demands made upon me by the pharmaceutical industry, my new responsibilities, while more exacting in some ways, could normally be discharged within the regular routine of a daily commuter, i.e a 15 minute bike ride to the local railway station, a 45 minute train journey to London Waterloo, and a 15 minute walk to the Home Office, to be traversed in reverse in the evening, adding, incidentally, years to my life. Better still, this metamorphosis took place quite soon after the Sadler's Wells Opera Company had transferred itself from Rosebury Avenue to the London Coliseum in St. Martin's Lane, which lay within easy walking distance of both my office and Waterloo Station. It was as if all obstacles to the indulgence of my taste for opera had been miraculously removed. But it took me some time to become a total addict, there being so many other attractions now within easy reach - in the West End, on the South Bank, at the Albert Hall and the Barbican - but the appeal of what was soon to become the English National Opera Company's productions at the Coliseum grew stronger with every encounter. Only two constraints remained - the cost of the tickets, and my need for the companionship of a fellow operagoer.

The fact that my wife did not share my enthusiasm for opera affected both these considerations. Although we were becoming marginally more affluent by degrees, we had lost the financial benefit of the company car, and still had the expense of two children of school age whose existence limited, not only my wife's earning power, but also our freedom of movement in the evenings. All of which meant that when we treated ourselves to a night out, it had to be in favour of something we could both enjoy. Fortunately, however, since none of my other spare-time activities involved me in any expense at all, and no special arrangements for my transportation to and from the theatre were required, my wife was happy to grant me this one self-indulgence. In return, out of consideration for the family budget, and in deference to the habit of a lifetime, I felt

obliged to occupy as cheap a seat as possible, which meant, at the Coliseum, the Balcony, but, soon, having reduced the cost by becoming a subscriber, the more comfortable Upper Circle, where I remained for several years, always ensuring a front row seat by booking as far ahead as was permitted, confident in the knowledge that, in my now more settled circumstances, I was unlikely to be prevented by any unforeseeable pressures of business from occupying it when the time came.

Finding a companion called for more ingenuity, but the task was made easier by my discovery that there were many more opera-lovers among my new colleagues in the Civil Service than there had been among those in my previous career. Having identified them, however, I was reluctant, initially, to presume upon so brief an acquaintance to propose a joint booking, three months ahead, for productions which might not yet have been premiered. My solution was to take the gamble of booking an extra ticket for each performance, relying on the excellent position of the seats and the attractive price resulting from the subscriber's discount, to make it possible for me to offer them for sale to selected colleagues, nearer the date, with little fear of refusal. I am happy to report that this device never once let me down, and, better still, that it led me eventually to find the one ideal companion with whom I have been operagoing ever since.

The fact that she was young, attractive, and single, raised a few eyebrows at first, but, since we made no secret of our relationship and its motivating passion, our partnership grew to be accepted by family, friends and colleagues for what it was, and we have continued to enjoy each other's company, whenever a suitable opportunity has presented itself, to the present day. More to the point, however, is that these fortunate circumstances permitted me, for twenty five years, from the 1970s to the late 1990s, when I emigrated to Australia for family reasons, to attend virtually every opera produced by the Sadler's Wells/ English National Opera Company at the London Coliseum, plus any which happened to be sung in English at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, together with several sung in English by the Welsh National Opera Company on its visits to the capital, and a few "semi-staged" as Promenade Concerts by the Glyndebourne Opera Company at the Royal Albert Hall [see Annex A]. And, as if this were not enough, I found that there was another rich seam of opera within easy reach, waiting to be discovered.

Hardly had I perfected my opera-going techniques in the West End, when I stumbled on the fact that, to the east, in the London Barbican, lay the Guildhall School of Music and Drama whose curriculum required its students to demonstrate their talents, from time to time, in public, information about these performances being made available at the beginning of each term. Ranging from three-act plays to poetry readings, and from chamber music to symphony concerts, they were mostly presented on the school's own premises, which boasted, among other concert facilities, a small, but fully-equipped theatre, and it was here, twice a year, usually in March, June, or November, that the students mounted a full-length opera, running for four nights, and featuring two alternative casts. What a godsend that turned out to be! More than two dozen operas over the years, many of them great rarities [see Annex A], and, in the early days, admission was free and the programmes cost 20p, although a modest charge was introduced later and the programmes became glossier and more expensive. It was imperative, however, to book as soon as the information was published, because the quality of the performances, and the numbers of proud relatives of the performers, were such that the demand for seats increased steadily over the years.

Many of my happiest hours at the opera have been spent in that little theatre where none of the seats was more than a few rows from the stage. It was not unlike being back in the stalls at the Keighley Hippodrome, and a far cry from the basilican spaces of the Coliseum, although there was nothing diminutive about the stage itself, or the orchestra pit, both of which could accomodate a full complement of performers in works featuring the large casts favoured by the school for understandable reasons. And, since, with very few exceptions, the operas were sung in English, my proximity to the performers meant that every detail of the productions could be savoured almost from the inside, as it were. On my very first visit, I was treated the most completely satisfying production of Mozart's "Cosi fan Tutte" that I have ever experienced. Other memorable occasions were Chabrier's charming "L'Etoile", Mozart's "forgotten" opera "La Finta Giardiniera", Poulenc's stunning "The Carmelites" and other rarities, such as Dvorak's "The Cunning Peasant" and Wolf-Ferrari's "Il Campiello", but it would be wrong to particularise, since I never spent an evening there that was less than enjoyable.

Obviously, the performances were not world class, but, given the total commitment of the talented young performers, they were

never less than engaging, and, since the simple aim of each production was to realise the chosen masterpiece as convincingly as the available resources would allow, the whole was invariably greater than its parts. Which is just as it should be with opera...and more than could be said for some of the productions I witnessed at the other, more prestigious, opera houses I was patronising at the time. But these duds, I am happy to report, were only a small proportion of the more than 160 different operas in over 210 separate productions which I attended during those golden years. So many, in fact, that, when drawing up a comprehensive list of them for the first time [Annexe A] I find that there are many I can barely recall, even with the programmes in front of me. There are some, however, I will never forget....

Most memorable of all, without a doubt, was the "Goodall Ring", to use a term familiar, surely, to any opera-lover living in the UK during the 1970s, when it was used as shorthand for the Sadler's Wells production, at the Coliseum, of the four operas which together constitute Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelung", under the musical direction of Reginald Goodall, who had emerged, late in life, from years of relative obscurity as a repetiteur at Covent Garden, to demonstrate a world class insight into Wagner's massive scores. I have always regarded it as one of the great privileges of my life to have had the benefit, on my first encounter with the Ring cycle, not only of Goodall's masterly handling of the musical content, but also of the Glen Byam Shaw/John Blatchley production, which interwove Wagner's original concepts, without undue distortion, thankfully, into Ralph Koltai's "futuristic" designs - and, of course, that wonderful cast singing in English. What a combination!

I had already met many of this team at quite close quarters in 1968 when the only opera-lover I ever encountered in the pharmaceutical industry (and even he was almost exclusively Wagnerian in inclination) persuaded me to accompany him to a performance of the "Goodall Mastersingers" i.e the acclaimed Sadler's Wells production of Richard Wagner's "The Mastersingers of Nurenburg", recently transferred, along with the entire company, from the Sadler's Wells Theatre to the Coliseum. The ticket prices, in those early days, were oddly idiosyncratic, and my friend had discovered that seats in the big stageside boxes cost little more than those in the upper circle, as a result of which my second encounter with Wagner's operas was the exact polar opposite of my first one at Covent Garden seventeen years earlier.

The stageside box may not be the ideal perspective from which to judge a production as a whole, but it cannot be bettered as a vantage point for assimilating the words and music. There, in full view before me (albeit stretching away into the middle distance), was the huge orchestra, with maestro Goodall's every gesture observable in profile. There, too, were Alberto Remedios, Margaret Curphy, and Norman Bailey, as Walther von Stolzing, Eva Pogner, and Hans Sachs, respectively, almost close enough to touch - or so it seemed. And there, of course, was Wagner's great comic opera, of which I was able to savour every note and every word. What an epiphany! I sat entranced through the whole four and three quarter hours, experiencing, for the first time, that distinctively Wagnerian timeworld, in which events unfold and characters move at a seemingly more deliberate pace than in real life, together with the growing realisation that I had hitherto been sadly misled, by the samples of his works I had heard, about Wagner's stature as an opera composer.

Subsequent encounters with "The Mastersingers", however, have led me to feel that the last act is about half an hour too long, and to find myself giving vent to a silent scream when, at about the four hour point, Walther, having won the singing contest and the hand of Eva, suddenly declines, for quite puerile reasons, to be admitted to the ranks of the Mastersingers, thus giving Hans Sachs an excuse to sing him the long lecture about the virtues of "German Art" which persuades him to change his mind. This is an early example of Wagner's tendency to allow doctrinaire considerations to outweigh aesthetic ones, but I could find no fault with the opera on first acquaintance, and was only too happy to seize the opportunity of enlarging on my experience of Wagner's oeuvre when the "Goodall Ring" began to emerge at the Coliseum a couple of years later.

By the time these ENO productions were finally retired, I had visited each of the four operas which together constitute Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelungs", at least three times, possibly four, separately at first, and then as complete cycles. It was a heaven-sent opportunity to familiarise myself with the finer detail of the immense tapestry of words and music which was Wagner's unique contribution to the world of human enjoyment. And it was an investment which has continued to pay dividends down through the years and enables me still to revel in the seemingly inexhaustible riches of The Ring, whenever the opportunity presents itself. But here too I have a reservation, and quite a serious one, I fear. In spite of my readiness to

feel differently about it, I found myself experiencing, from the very start, a growing sense of disappointment with the last of the operas, "The Twilight of the Gods", the very climax of the whole cycle, and have finally come to the reluctant conclusion that it does not have the artistic merit of the three preceding operas.

The music is marvellous, of course, even sublime, but, as Wagner himself would have been the first to acknowledge, there is more to opera than the music, and the plot on which the music is based is sadly unconvincing when compared with the three beautifully crafted operas which have gone before. It's inadequacies may stem from the fact that Wagner wrote the libretto, originally, as "Siegfried's Death" and then felt obliged to write a preceding opera, "Young Siegfried", to make sense of it, then "The Valkyrie" to make sense of that, and, finally, "The Rhinegold", in what must have been the most inspired piece of serendipity in the history of art, after which, having created a completely new genre when composing the music forward, he found himself stuck, at the end, with an old-fashioned melodrama of the kind that he had long since put behind him. The splendour of the music may compensate for the opera's punishing length and the unrealisability of its climax on the stage of any normal opera house, but cannot excuse the dramatic ineptitude of, for example, the opening scene.

Not the least of the merits of the first three operas of The Ring is the buttonholing way in which they grab your interest from the very start - the Rhinemaidens cavorting provocatively with Alberich on the bed of the Rhine; an exhausted Siegmund staggering into Hunding's hut out of the storm; Mime hammering at his anvil, complaining loudly about the behaviour of Siegfried, who enters with a live bear. There's nothing like that here, just three old ladies, the Norns, shrouded in gloom, predicting doom, at considerable length, in slow time. And when the plot finally gets going, we find that it revolves around a device which would be difficult to swallow in a children's fairytale - a magic drink which completely erases Brunnhilde from Siegfried's mind and causes him to fall instantly in love with Guttrune, after which, however, everyone behaves as if he's in full possession of his faculties and guilty of all kinds of duplicity. Even Brunnhilde, confronted by Siegfried's bizarre behaviour towards her, does not question whether this sudden personality change might be due to some extrinsic factor, possibly of an occult nature, but proceeds to facilitate his murder by calling for vengeance on the point of Hagan's spear

and revealing that her own magic spells will not protect Siegfried from a stab in the back. Then, there's Siegfried's whimsical rejection of a last chance to save his life by returning the ring to the Rhinemaidens. It's all so contrived - a clear case of ends dictating means.

Fortunately, the first three operas of The Ring place no such strains on our credulity, We are, of course, in a mythical world in which supernatural powers are in evidence, but they are exercised with commendable restraint by a cast of larger-than-life characters who run true to their respective forms throughout. The narrative bowls along at a cracking pace (given that it's in Wagnerian time!), and the music - ah, the music - wraps everything up into a seamless whole which is continuously and authentically operatic. It can be an overwhelming experience when sympathetically staged - but only, surely, if one can understand the words. Wagner's Ring is virtually all dialogue from beginning to end. More than sixteen hours of it! How anyone can claim to enjoy sitting through it without understanding the words, I simply cannot credit. And, unusually for Wagner in his later years, there's plenty of action, too - hardly a dull moment, in fact.

With the possible exception of Weber's "Oberon", "The Rhinegold" must be the most action-packed opera in the modern repertoire, with its water-nymphs, dwarves, gods, and giants all busily interacting with each other, first, on the bed of the Rhine, then, on a mountain top beside the newly built Valhalla, then, in the underground caves of Nibelheim, and, finally, back on the mountain top for the denouement and the god's final entry into Valhalla. It runs for nearly three hours and has no intervals, but I found it, and still find it, not a moment too long.

The next opera, "The Valkyrie", is an even greater achievement - Wagner's greatest, in the view of many, including myself. Where Rhinegold, for all its rich invention, is basically a rivetingly good yarn, Valkyrie is a wither-ringing emotional roller-coaster, involving us, first, in the adulterous (and incestuous) love affair between Siegmund and Sieglinde; then, in the moral duel between Wotan and his wife Fricka, which ends with his being compelled to agree to the death of his own son and the collapse of his hopes of recovering the Ring; then, in Brunnhilde's painful dilemma when she is obliged to convey this unpalatable fact to Siegmund, knowing that Wotan dearly wishes it were otherwise, only to be faced with Siegmund's flat refusal to accompany her, after his impending death, to Valhalla, if it

means leaving his beloved Sieglinde behind. Her decision to follow Wotan's wishes rather than his orders, and fight for Siegmund against Hunding is the turning point of the opera, bringing the wrath of Wotan crashing around her ears, and leading to a tumultuous last act in which the eight other valkyries vainly attempt to shield Brunnhilde from Wotan's anger, and Sieglinde (newly pregnant with Siegfried, and carrying the shattered pieces of the dead Siegmund's sword) escapes into the surrounding forest, leaving Brunnhilde to face Wotan's fury alone.

This final scene between the outraged father and the wheedling daughter is one of the greatest operatic confrontations of all time, and when Brunnhilde finally succeeds in unlocking Wotan's suppressed affection for her by persuading him to create a wall of fire round the defenceless sleeping human to which he is about to reduce her - thus ensuring that only a hero will be able to take possession of her - the music rises jubilantly to the occasion and speaks straight to the heart, as does the subsequent "Wotan's Farewell and Fire Music", during which, before kissing Brunnhilde to sleep and summoning Loge's fire to surround her recumbent form, he sings of the pleasure he has taken in her company in the past and the sense of loss he will feel at her absence from his side in the future.

A hard act to follow! But, the next opera, "Siegfried", while not as profoundly moving throughout, is equally enthralling and quite different in style - something of a chamber opera, in fact, with never more than two characters on stage at the same time, and something, too, of a comic opera, as it affords us the only light relief to be found in the Ring cycle. Again, the story unfolds at a canter, with Wagner's powers of invention still at full bore. He cleverly combines mummery with menace in the character of Mime the dwarf, and artfully recapitulates the story so far in a boisterous riddling contest between Mime and Wotan. And the juvenile Siegfried's ignorance of the rules of civilised behaviour allows him to ride rough-shod over, successively, Mime, Fafner, and Wotan and even to sing an old-fashioned aria while mending his father's sword in the forge, after first reducing it to a pile of iron filings.

Even Siegfried's later attempts to imitate the song of the Woodbird, in what seems to be merely a charming sylvan interlude, turn out to be essential to the plot by rousing the sleeping dragon and bringing him out of his cave to do battle, and again, when, after killing Fafner, Siegfried inadvertently

tastes the dragon's blood and finds that he can understand what the Woodbird is saying. Before describing the prize that could be his in the shape of the fair Brunnhilde, asleep nearby inside her ring of fire, the Woodbird advises Siegfried to retrieve the golden Ring hidden in Fafner's cave and warns him that Mime is planning to kill him and steal it, but the dragon's blood he has tasted will enable him to understand the true intentions behind the dwarf's ingratiating words. There follows a blackly humorous scene in which Mime, in trying to assure Siegfried of his affection for him, finds himself revealing exactly how he intends to kill him. Siegfried is so revolted by this treachery that he puts Mime to death, and, free now of all entanglements, sets off to follow the Woodbird's lead towards Brunnhilde's Rock.

In the last act of "Siegfried" we are transported from forest darkness to uplands light, and Wagner's scoring becomes noticeably richer, due to the fact that he had turned aside from composing "Siegfried", at the end of the second act, to further develop his powers by dashing off "Tristan and Isolde" and "The Mastersingers" before returning to it. The act opens, however, on a sombre note as Wotan summons Erde from the depths below to confirm that doom and gloom are now impending for the gods, and when Siegfried enters on his way to finding Brunnhilde, Wotan tries to deter him, first, by the awesome majesty of his presence, which leaves Siegfried singularly unimpressed, then, by displaying a knowledge of Siegfried's antecedents which only serves to arouse his suspicions and lead him to threaten Wotan with physical violence if he doesn't get out of the way, and, finally, by barring Siegfried's path with his once mighty spear, which Siegfried promptly hacks in twain with his sword. Given the significant roles played hitherto in the story by these two weapons, this is a moment rich in symbolism, marking the end of the gods' power to influence events, and leaving Siegfried free to go his own way.

The final scene on Brunnhilde's Rock provides a fitting climax to this enchanting opera and Wagner's music rises thrillingly to the occasion. It begins quietly enough with Siegfried, having braved the protective flames, struggling to remove the constraining armour from what he takes to be a sleeping warrior before discovering to his shocked surprise that this potential playmate is a girl. So unnerved is our hero by this experience that he runs away in fright, summoning up just enough courage to return and administer the kiss of life before retreating once again to watch in awe, as Brunnhilde, to the accompaniment of a

succession of Wagner's most exquisitely wrought harmonies, stirs, wakes, greets the sunlight, and launches us into the only unambiguously happy half hour in the entire Ring Cycle. In this great duet between Brunnhilde, who knows everything, and Siegfried, who knows only one thing, it is the single-minded persistence of Siegfried's passion which prevails over Brunnhilde's reluctance to accept her loss of status from immortal warrior-maiden to mortal housewife, and leads her finally to declare her unconditional love for him to the strains of one of Wagner's most bewitching melodies. The act ends ecstatically with the happy couple in each others' arms, swearing eternal love to an appropriately Wagnerian orchestral accompaniment.

Given the failure, in my eyes, of "The Twilight of the Gods", to live up to the expectations raised by the three preceding operas, this uninhibited display of emotion would seem to be an appropriate point to leave "The Ring of the Niebelung" and take a look at the rest of Wagner's major works, all of which were performed by the ENO during the years in question, except for "Tannhauser", of which I have subsequently made the acquaintance. They did "Lohengrin" twice - first, in 1971, Colin Graham producing and Charles Mackerras conducting, and again in '93, Tim Albery producing, Mark Elder conducting - "Tristan and Isolde" twice - in '81 (Byam Shaw/Blatchley and Reginald Goodall), and in '85 (Gotz Friedrich and Goodall) - "The Flying Dutchman" in '82 (David Pountney and Mark Elder) - "Parsifal" in '86 (Joachim Herz and Reginald Goodall), and even "Rienzi" in '83 (Nicholas Hytner and Heribert Esser).

Each of these productions was admirable in its own way, but my reactions to the operas varied. I found none of them to be as wholly enjoyable as the first three operas of "The Ring" or the first four hours of "The Mastersingers", but some were better than others. "Lohengrin" starts off convincingly enough, given the postulates of the plot, but descends into melodrama in Act II with the wicked machinations of Telramund and Ortrud against the saintly Lohengrin and Elsa, and requires a series of supernatural contrivances in Act III to bring about the final victory of good over evil. The music is appealing, of course, and, if you disregard the joins, there are some thrilling episodes, but the characters are rather two-dimensional, and the plot a bit too formulaic to be interesting. It features, however, a reasonable amount of dramatic action, and is of not excessive length.

This is more than can be said of "Tannhauser", in which hardly anything happens, very slowly, for several hours, during the passage of which we are invited to accept, not only that a gathering of medieval knights would be so deeply shocked by a song extolling the pleasures of wordly love that its perpetrator escapes their total ostracism only by agreeing to make a pilgrimage to Rome to seek divine forgiveness for his offence, but also that, once there, a medieval Pope would decline to grant him absolution at any price. Less surprising, perhaps, is that this long, slow wallow in religiosity ends with both the hero and the heroine dying of spiritual exhaustion. Absurdities of plot are not unusual in opera, and one could accept them here, perhaps, if the length of the piece were not so totally disproportionate to its dramatic content. "Tannhauser" is not, I fear, an ordeal I would pay good money to endure again. And, while recognising the superiority of their musical content, I must confess to feeling much the same about both "Tristan and Isolde" and "Parsifal".

Initially, the spirit was not unwilling. As a teenager earning little more than a pound a week, one of the first gramophone recordings of classical music I bought was of the Prelude and Liebestod (spanning two 12 inch sides in those 78rpm days) which I eventually wore out, and the two productions of "Tristan and Isolde" I attended at the Coliseum were of a quality which could not in any way have interfered with my enjoyment of the piece as a whole. I have even exposed myself to yet another interpretation of it since, but my reaction has remained the same: as music, full marks; as music-drama, one out of ten. In Act I, after nearly an hour of conversation, mostly concerning events which have occurred beforehand, the protagonists share a drink; in Act II, after another hour's conversation, some of it of an amorous nature, there is a brief flurry of dramatic activity; in Act III, after yet another hour of dialogue, Tristan dies, and there is a further small amount of activity before Isolde sings herself, at considerable length, to death.

"Parsifal" is even longer and contains little more action per hour. Act I is mostly conversation, much of it explanatory monologue by one Gurnemanz (a relatively minor character who nevertheless seems to do more actual singing in the opera than anyone else), but three things happen at widely spaced intervals - a swan falls from the sky, having been wounded by an arrow shot off-stage by Parsifal, Parsifal faints on hearing about his antecedents from Kundry, and the Grail is uncovered and has to be covered up again. There is a little more action in Act II,

which begins, however, with a lengthy exchange between the wicked wizard Klingsor and Kundry about how to deal with the pure fool Parsifal. This leads to a brief passage of arms during which Klingsor's knights fail to overcome Parsifal, whereupon a magic garden staffed by attractive flower maidens makes a very welcome appearance. But these, too, fail to ensnare Parsifal, and it is left to Kundry to do everything in her power to seduce him, and, when Parsifal rejects her, call on Klingsor himself to take a hand. What follows is the dramatic high-point of the opera. Klingsor appears, and hurls the Holy Spear at Parsifal who catches it in mid-air, thus destroying the magician's power.

After these excitements, Act III reverts to relative uneventfulness during which a great deal of religious sentiment is expressed, and Parsifal faints again. There is the occasional symbolic act - Kundry washes Parsifal's feet, Parsifal baptises the repentent Kundry, Parsifal heals Amfortas with the Holy Spear, the Grail is once again uncovered, and the gospel according to Wagner draws long-windedly to a close.

Given that they contain so much good music and so little action, "Tannhauser", "Tristan and Isolde" and "Parsifal" might be more appropriately, and certainly more cheaply, performed in the concert hall as oratorios. But they are probably too long, even, for that. My first encounter with "Parsifal" was, in fact, at the BBC Promenade Concerts in the Royal Albert Hall, where it was given over two consecutive nights, and I listened to it with no sense of strain. The ENO production, when it came, was unexceptionable, and I was grateful for the opportunity of seeing the opera staged, but, starting at 5pm and finishing at 11pm (leaving me with barely time to catch the last train home!), it was not an experience I would be inclined to repeat. Twenty years later, on the other hand, I attended a performance at the Coliseum of Berlioz's "The Trojans", which was almost the same length as "Parsifal", but, thanks to the dramatic content and the pace at which the story unfolds, seemed, in spite of the irritations of the modern dress production, hardly a moment too long. I would certainly pay to see "The Trojans" again, but preferably more sensibly staged.

And I would gladly pay to see "The Flying Dutchman" again, because I thoroughly enjoyed the ENO version (in producer David Pountney's clever translation, with Norman Bailey as the Dutchman and the delightful Josephine Bairstow as Senta). It gave a thoroughly convincing account of what must be a very

difficult opera to mount, given its requirement for three different sets, and Wagner's direction that the opera should be performed (as it was, here) without a break - an early example of his propensity to put the bums and bladders of his audience to the test. There are credulity-straining aspects to the plot, of course, but none of them unacceptable in an opera which weds music to drama so fortuitously. There are even a few good tunes to take away with you.

The big treat, however, was the ENO's "Rienzi". It was one of three low-budget, ephemeral productions of rarely performed works by well-known composers sponsored by a firm called Norwest Holst. The other two were Tchaikovsky's "Mazeppa" and Rossini's "Moses". The "Rienzi" was the most memorable of the three, capitalising on the politics in the plot by updating the opera to the 20th century and giving it a distinctly fascist v. communist flavour with crowds milling about in all directions. At one point the audience was showered from the ceiling with bright red leaflets, reading THE ROMAN PEOPLE STRONG AND FREE, and, at another, a full-sized tank came bursting through the backcloth. A most enjoyable evening. I can't remember much about the piece itself (except that the music was attractive and the drama reasonably engrossing), because these productions were avowedly unrevivable, and I have never seen "Rienzi" performed since. Unjustly neglected in my view.

These lively, ad hoc productions typified the spirit of what was, for me, a golden age of opera at the Coliseum, running through the 70s and 80s into the 90s. How fortunate I was! Nothing seemed to be too challenging for the ENO to tackle, and, with a stable of producers to draw on which included the likes of Colin Graham, David Pountney and Jonathan Miller, their reach very rarely exceeded their grasp. As early as 1972, when they were still called Sadler's Wells, Colin Graham staged Prokofiev's massive "War and Peace" for the first time in Britain to great effect. This was followed by such items as Penderecki's "Devils of Loudon" in 1973, Ginastera's "Bomarzo" and Symanowski's "King Roger" in 1976, Janacek's "The Makropulos Case" in 1972, "From the House of the Dead" in 1977, and "The Adventures of Mr. Broucek" in 1978, Martinu's "Julietta" 1978, and Poulenc's "Les Mamelles de Tiresias" in 1979, to name the more exciting rarities which interspersed the familiar operas from the international repertoire during only the first decade.

Although many of the, no doubt, admirable productions I patronised on my regular visits to the Coliseum during those

years are lost to my memory, there are others I remember well, mainly, but not invariably, for the pleasure they gave me. Apart from Jonathan Miller's acclaimed mafia "Rigoletto" (which excited me only moderately), and his Edwardian "Mikado" (about which I had no reservations at all) - both of them destined to be revived ad infinitum into the future - I can still recall his stagings of "The Turn of the Screw", "Don Giovanni", "Rosenkavalier", "La Traviata", and "Tosca" with some clarity, but little, for some reason, of his "Arabella", "Carmen", "Marriage of Figaro" or "Otello". I remember the "Tosca", however, because it was his one failure. Encouraged, possibly, by the huge success of his mafia "Rigoletto", he set his "Tosca" in the wartime Rome of Spring 1944, still under German occupation after the fall of Mussolini - Act I in "A church", Act II in "Police Headquarters", and Act III in "An execution yard". But Puccini has embedded his great opera so firmly in The Church of St Andrea della Valle, The Palazzo Farnese, and The Castel Sant' Angelo, and in such a precise historical moment, that it is virtually impossible to make sense of it in any other setting. That certainly proved to be the case on this occasion, and the production was never revived.

None of David Pountney's productions was quite as ill-conceived, although his used-car-lot "Carmen" and deconstructed "Valkyrie" came close. But I have fond memories of his "Adventures of Mr. Broucek", "Cunning Little Vixen", and "Makropulos Case" (with Josephine Bairstow excellent as Emilia Marty), his "Flying Dutchman" (Josephine scoring again as Senta), Prokofiev's "The Gambler" (an opera which I have yet to see performed again), Busoni's intriguing "Doctor Faustus" (another I have not yet been able to revisit), a bewitching "Hansel and Gretel" (justly revived every Christmas for years afterwards), an hilarious "Orpheus in the Underworld" with Gerald Scarfe's outrageous designs, and the admirable Emile Belcourt (my favourite Loge), as Pluto, "Pelleas and Melisande", "The Queen of Spades", a successfully (for once) demythologised "Rusalka", Shostakovitch's mind-blowing "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" (Josephine rising to the occasion yet again), and a brilliantly hard-edged "Wozzeck". I am familiar with every detail of these last three productions because I have them on videotape.

Other productions which I still recall with pleasure were Tim Alberry's "Billy Budd" and "Peter Grimes" (both still available on video), and Joachim Hertz's "Salome" (another crackling performance by Josephine Bairstow - unavailable, alas, on video). And I can vividly recall Elijah Mojinsky's production

of Ligeti's extraordinary "Le Grande Macabre", in which the incomparable Ann Howard appeared in leather underwear, and fishnet stockings, cracking a whip - an arresting combination of voice, face, and figure! But the production which I remember with the greatest clarity was Richard Jones's "Love for Three Oranges" (with the lively Lesley Garrett as Princess Ninetta). The opera itself was a complete delight, of course, but the production simply sparkled with fun, involving, among other excitements, a "scratch and smell" card issued with the programme for the members of the audience to use, when instructed to do so by a Master of Ceremonies, on six occasions during the performance, one of which related to the crude method used by the demon Farfarello to make the wind that blows the Prince and Truffaldino across the skies.

Another memorable aspect of that production, when I first saw it, was the presence, on the right front side of the stage, of a spotlit individual dressed in contemporary casual wear who appeared to be interpreting the words being sung by the performers into the sign language of the deaf. Taking this to be yet another amusing comment by the producer on the surrealism of the piece, I turned to share the joke with my companion, only to be assured by her that this was not part of the production at all, but a genuine service offered at certain specified performances. I could hardly believe my ears. How could any possible benefit to someone daft enough to pay to see an opera without being able to hear it, outweigh the distraction visited upon the rest of the audience by this madly gesticulating figure? Needless to say, I took great care, after that, to avoid any performance at which this service was provided.

And it would be wrong to end this account of my ENO years without remarking on the few occasions on which I left the Coliseum a dissatisfied customer. The only opera I actually walked out on was Philip Glass's "Akhnaten" in 1985. A couple of years later, thanks to an intriguing libretto by Doris Lessing, I managed to stay the course with another of Glass's pieces, "The Making of the Representative for Planet 8", the music of which I found unremittingly tedious, but the combination, in Akhnaten, of boring score and boring libretto (by Philip Glass himself, in association with no less than three other contributors - hard as this may be for anyone who has endured it to believe), was more than I could take. Like little Liu, I could bear no more, and left the theatre at the second interval. The success enjoyed by Philip Glass as an opera composer puzzles me almost as much as does that of Peter Sellars

as an opera producer. Perhaps they will combine forces one day to synthesise an opera (or "make a statement", as they might prefer to put it) on the subject of "The Emperor's New Clothes".

Although not so entirely without merit, another production which left me feeling cheated, was Stephen Sondheim's "Pacific Overtures". Given the pleasures to be derived from the operettas of Gilbert & Sullivan, Offenbach, and Johann Strauss, I can see no reason why opera companies should not occasionally perform more recent works of a similar weight, but there are many more substantial modern musicals than those composed by Sondheim, who seems to me, on the evidence available, to be a clever enough lyricist, but deficient in musical talent. Cole Porter's "Kiss me Kate", Leonard Bernstein's "West Side Story" and "Candide", Lerner and Lowe's "Guys and Dolls", and even Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Cats", to name but a few, all leave "Pacific Overtures" looking pretty thin by comparison. As do they Sondheim's more recent "Sweeney Todd" which has succeeded in making its way into opera houses in some parts of the world. Perhaps he is a better salesman than he is a composer?

But there was one opera I attended at the Coliseum which I disliked so much that I actually booed at the end. It was a thing called "The BAKXAI" by John Buller, and my distaste for it was due, not to the fact that the libretto was by the Greek playwright Euripides, who had died in 406BC, but that it was sung in the original Greek. Of course, a Narrator was provided whose interjections were intended to keep the audience informed about what was going on, and the composer, in the programme notes, pointed to the precedent set by Stravinsky in his "Oedipus Rex" as justification for imposing this monstrosity upon us, oblivious, apparently, to the profound difference between the simple clarity of the human tragedy unfolded by Jean Cocteau in Latin in "Oedipus Rex", and the arcane complexities of the obscure Greek legend explored by Euripides in eighteen separate scenes of ancient text. Adding insult to injury was the knowledge that this exercise in incomprehensibility had been commissioned by the *English* National Opera Company itself. I was sorely tempted to refer them to the Office of Fair Trading for prosecution under the Sale of Goods Act.

My displeasure was tempered by the pity I felt for the performers whose talents had been so tragically wasted on the weeks of rehearsal they must have spent learning to sing the stuff, talents which might otherwise have been invested in something I would have been happy to applaud. What must it be

like, I wonder, to be involved in such a misconceived enterprise? I would dearly like to know whether the experience was more rewarding to the participants than the outcome was to me. Perhaps my sympathies were misplaced.

"THE BAKXAI" was one of several new operas commissioned by the ENO during the 25 years of my regular patronage, all of which I dutifully attended, but none of which was of sufficient merit, it seems, to survive its initial run. Why was this, I wonder? Could it be that the musical language of our times is unsuited to the expression of human thoughts and feelings, or is it that the artistic objectives of today's composers discourage any direct approach to the hearts and minds (and pockets) of the operagoing public?

It is surely paradoxical that the popularity of opera in the world today is fuelled by works which were written in the past with the object of making money by appealing to contemporary taste, but that today's operas, even when written to order, seem incapable, with few exceptions, of achieving that end. Whatever the reason, I feel certain that I am not alone in finding the operas of yesteryear, some of which are now nearly four centuries old, more enjoyable than the works commissioned by the ENO, and this is not because I am unreceptive to things new - I can enjoy modern music in the concert hall and at the ballet, I can relate to modern plays in the theatre, even to modern art, and can even, as I shall later demonstrate, enjoy modern operas which have been written to appeal to the discerning operalover rather than the musical avant garde.

But I am tempted to question the need for any new operas to be commissioned at all. If we accept that innovation and experiment are the lifeblood of the arts, and that artists are motivated by a creative urge to deliver fresh insights into the human condition, which they hope will be of sufficient appeal to the rest of us to earn them enough money to live on, then commissioning an opera looks a bit like putting the cart before the horse. At a time when opera is so expensive to produce that even performances of popular masterpieces are unable to pay their way by ticket sales alone, how sensible is it to give financial encouragement to composers and their librettists to produce operas in which they have felt no compelling urge to invest their own time and effort? Should not the existence of so many well-founded opera companies in the world, all of them looking for new works to perform, be an adequate incentive to any budding composer to strive to produce an opera which is

tailored to the tastes of the operagoing public, rather than one which may require operagoers somehow to tailor their tastes to it?

Any felt need for new operas left unmet by a moratorium on commissioning could, perhaps, be satisfied by reviving neglected masterpieces of earlier centuries, bearing in mind, however, that commercial success in the past cannot be taken as a guarantee of likely appeal today. There are several once successful opera composers whose works, and even names, are now forgotten, largely because their concoctions were designed to satisfy a contemporary taste which elevated one element of this hybrid artform, above the others to such an extent that the result falls some way short of being opera as we understand it today. It is my own belief that the operas of Handel, now quite frequently performed since their rediscovery after WW2, would have fallen into this category, had he not been such a great composer in other respects, and I must confess to feeling some bewilderment at the enthusiasm of their reception by modern audiences.

There is no denying that Handel's operas contain a lot of very good music, but he composed them, for commercial reasons, to a formula which delivered the solo performances demanded by the London audiences of the day, at the expense of dramatic credibility. The conventions of Italian *opera seria*, which permitted only the most exalted personages to be portrayed on the stage in circumstances deriving mainly from the myths and legends of ancient Greece and Rome, can present a number of difficulties to modern audiences. The first is that the plots tend to be, if not incomprehensible to anyone unfamiliar with them in advance, then so convoluted as to simply defy belief. Their sole purpose was to provide a succession of excuses, however feeble, for the kings, queens, heroes, heroines, gods and goddesses portrayed in them to sing solo arias of considerable elaboration expressing thoughts and feelings arising from developments occurring since the last aria was sung.

The serious nature of these, mainly introspective arias, and their delivery in static concert mode, obliges any other cast members unfortunate enough to be present to remain in respectful suspended animation for the duration. To make matters worse, many of them are *da capo* arias, which require the singer, upon finally reaching the end, to go "to the head", back to the beginning, to sing the whole thing again, with optional vocal

decoration ad.lib., and, since the basic text of each aria rarely amounts to more than a few lines, the amount of repetition this involves can verge upon the ludicrous. Another drawback is that the high rank of the protagonists precludes any two of them from singing at the same time, thus ruling out such *opera buffa* delights as duets, trios, and other ensembles. and there are episodes in Handel's operas (I am thinking of one in "Rodelinda", in particular) which scream out, in vain, for some such treatment. Equally debilitating is the absence of a chorus.

Since nothing but dry recitative is allowed to interrupt the solemn procession of solos, and little in the way of action takes place onstage, there is no good reason why these works could not be equally well performed in a concert hall at a significantly lower cost. As with Wagner's "oratorios", however, length might be a problem - over three hours in some cases - but eliminating the da capo from the arias would, perhaps, reduce them to acceptable proportions. One final difficulty, however, arises from the fact that Handel wrote many of his principal roles for the now redundant, surgically induced, male alto voice of the *castrati*, who were the "superstars" of the period, complete with competing fan clubs. In the initial revivals of Handel's operas, these parts were taken by female altos, to quite good musical effect, but at some cost to dramatic credibility. Admirable as they can be in such roles as Cherabino and Octavio, written to be played by women, it is difficult to see them as Julius Caesar, or Xerxes, no matter how well they sing the part.

But the second half of the last century saw the appearance on the scene of a new breed of singers, labelled counter-tenors, who were normal men in every respect, but capable of producing a falsetto voice of the same pitch and power as that of the female alto, making it possible for them to fill the male *castrati* roles more convincingly. The new voice was pioneered by Alfred Deller, who I heard for the first time at a Summer School of Music I attended at Bryaston in Dorset in 1950, and it came as quite a shock when the large, mustachioed individual I had earlier seen drinking pints of beer in the bar, began to sing a baroque aria in this strange, effeminate voice. He sang it beautifully, of course, but there is no denying that the incongruity of voice and appearance was distracting. We cannot know what the original *castrati* sounded like, but contemporary accounts give the impression that it was a bigger, rounder voice than that of the counter-tenor, which still remains, to my mind,

an unsuitable sound for kings and heroes to make, but uniquely effective in roles which are specifically written for it, such as Oberon in Britten's "Midsummer Night's Dream", and the refugee in Dove's "Flight".

Ironically, however, although his operas may nowadays seem to be more suited to the concert hall, Handel's true potential as an opera composer has been revealed by the resounding success of a recent adaptation of his oratorio "Semele" for the stage. Given a first class libretto by the poet and playwright, William Congreve, and freed from the constraints of opera seria, Handel here uses the greater resources of the concert hall to tell a typically opera seria story in a much more expansive and uninhibited fashion. And, although written for the "theatre of the mind", "Semele" lends itself very well to the imaginative treatment of which the modern theatre is capable. A large cast of characters, backed by a full chorus, are convincingly brought to life by Congreve, and interact quite credibly with each other as the story unfolds, and, although it ends tragically for Semele, there is a great deal of pleasure (and amusement) to be had on the way. The music is Handel at his best, with several truly memorable arias, plenty of choruses and only one counter-tenor filling the suitably wimpish role of Semele's husband-to-be, Athamas, who she jilts in favour of the god Jove, a tenor. A great English opera!

The ENO's brilliant production of "Semele" was staged at the Coliseum after my wife and I had emigrated to Australia to join our offspring, but I was fortunate enough to obtain a videotape of the production when it was broadcast on BBC Television in 1999, and I have never tired of watching it at regular intervals since, which is more than I can say for the other Handel operas I have on videotape.

I was a bit slow to catch on to the possibilities opened up to me by the application of home videotape recording to the telecasting of operas, and I still shudder, when coming to the end of two of my treasured home videoed operas from those early days, to find that I had taped them over previous recordings of equally admirable, but longer works, after watching them only once. What an idiot! But once the lasting value of the delights obtainable for the price of a blank video cassette dawned on me, I began assembling the collection which was to stand me in such good stead in my old age.

I was fortunate from the start in possessing an excellent hifi sound system through which to connect the audio output of my videotape recorder, rather than relying, as so many do, on the inferior sound quality available from the average TV set. Fortunate, too, in having this equipment installed in my own "den", away from the family televiewing facilities, and, thus equipped, I was able to watch and record any opera broadcast on UK television during my last few years in England. And there was a goodly number of these, because, in addition to the ENO, Covent Garden and Glyndebourne productions broadcast live on BBC and ITV, Channel Four put out a whole series of videotaped recordings of outstanding productions from the New York Metropolitan and San Francisco Operas which were unavailable commercially in the UK with English subtitles, and, to my mind, the subtitles are one of the most important attractions of opera on video, because they make it possible for me to hear works in their original language and understand the words being sung even better than if they had been sung in English.

I am still viewing all these recordings, from time to time, with pleasure, but the tapes I have returned to most frequently are those of a complete Ring cycle which the BBC put out, one act at a time, over ten weeks in the early 90's, prefacing each broadcast with a ten minute chat by a different "Wagnerite" each time. Taping these episodes was one of the best investments I ever made, because the production, by the Bavarian State Opera, although it takes the now fashionable liberties with time, place, furnishings, and attire, stays close enough to Wagner's original directions to be acceptably undistracting, and the casting is excellent. Robert Hale as Wotan, Hildegard Behrens as Brunhilde, and Rene Kollo as Siegfried, are the main players, but, from the Rheinmaidens through to the Gibichungs there is not, in either appearance or performance, a single weak link in the cast, which includes the inimitable Robert Tear as a Loge whose commentator's role has been expanded to include silent but graphic appearances before the curtain goes up on "Rheingold" and before it comes down on "Gotterdammerung". The conductor is Wolfgang Sawalisch and the producer Nikolaus Lehnhoff.

It is to videotapes such as these, all of which, if not sung in English, carry English subtitles, that I owe my intimate familiarity with Wagner's Ring Cycle and the many other operas now in my collection. There is nothing like having an opera on video for really getting to know it - for better or for worse! This is not to decry attendance at a live performance in a suitable theatre if one is available and affordable, but, for

many opera lovers, this is all too rarely the case. Any opera broadcast on TV can be preserved for future viewing for the price of a blank videotape, and increasing numbers of opera productions from the major opera houses of the world, starring top class performers, are available commercially on video for no more than the price of an opera ticket, many with English subtitles.

Initially, however, the incompatibility of the NTSC TV system used in North America with the PAL system used in most of the rest of the world (coupled with the curious fact that the English speaking market outside North America was deemed to be too small to justify transfers to PAL with English subtitles) put the many excellent opera videos produced in the USA with English subtitles, out of my reach, but the development of VCRs and TV sets which could handle both NTSC and PAL tapes eventually removed even this constraint on my appetite for opera on video. But this was some time after I had emigrated to Australia in 1997 (for family reasons), taking with me my small collection of tapes, which now included such rarities as the rivetting Kirov production of Prokofiev's astonishing "The Fiery Angel", Covent Garden's convincing version of Verdi's most unusual opera, "Stiffelio", neither of which I had seen before, and the definitive Glyndebourne "Eugene Onegin" which I had seen semi-staged (without subtitles, of course) as a Prom concert.

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I had retired from the Civil Service seven years earlier, but my likeminded friend and I had continued, having by now graduated (thanks to our increasing affluence) to more expensive seats, to follow our well-established routine and attend new opera productions in London until the day of my departure. The last of these were, as it happened, interesting curiosities which I was unlikely ever to encounter again - Handel's "L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato" at the ENO (not, strictly speaking, an opera at all), and a triple bill at the Guildhall School consisting of Weill's "The Tsar has his Photograph Taken", Krenek's "The Dictator", and Ullman's "The Emperor of Atlantis". A fitting finale, I thought, to the golden age of operagoing I was leaving behind. I was to find, however, that Australia had more to offer me than the occasional expensive seat at Sydney's famous opera house. For it was to Sydney we went, initially, to join our offspring, but very quickly established ourselves just outside the metropolitan area to the north, in the delightful coastal town of Woy Woy, which nestles just off the beaten

track, between the main interstate railway line and the beaches of beautiful Broken Bay at the mouth of the Hawkesbury River, and is only an hour by train from central Sydney.

Once we had settled into our new home, and my researches had revealed that it was possible, using public transport, to attend performances at the Sydney Opera House and get back home at a not unreasonable hour, I plunged on a ticket for Australian Opera's production of Berlioz' "Beatrice and Benedict", sung in English. But it was a disappointing experience. The travel arrangements worked well enough, but the inside of the Opera House came as something of a shock after the iconic exterior. It was rather like being under a large upturned boat, and my modestly priced seat was too far back from the stage, and the acoustics too poor, for me to hear the words clearly, although the surtitles (of which this was my first experience) were a help, and I could not fault the production. The interval, too, was an entertainment in its own right, thanks to the spectacular views of Sydney Harbour available from the terrace, but I had no one to share it all with, alas, and arrived back home after midnight feeling that the expedition had not been sufficiently worthwhile to be repeated.

All was not lost, however, as I had been scouring the globe for opera videos in PAL format with English subtitles, and buying any that took my fancy, such as Australian Opera's excellent version of Wagner's "Mastersingers"(1988), the Kirov's of Prokofiev's "War and Peace"(1991), and Glyndebourne's of Mozart's "Magic Flute"(1978), Beethoven's "Fidelio" (1979), Britten's "Midsummer Night's Dream", (1981), and the Covent Garden "Tales of Hoffman" (1981), to name but a few. I had also been scouring any video rental shops and municipal lending libraries within reach for opera videos I could borrow and copy, and I confess to acquiring several of my alltime favourites in this rather unorthodox manner. Not surprisingly, the past productions of Australian Opera were more likely than others to be found on these shelves, many of them featuring Dame Joan Sutherland, and it was thanks to this that I was able to make the acquaintance of Donizetti's "Lucia de Lamamour", and Meyerbeer's "Les Huguenots", both of which I enjoyed tremendously, and acquire an impressive version of Poulenc's "The Carmelites", sung in English. Other discoveries included a couple of Glyndebourne productions from the early days of videorecording, one of which was an excellent 1972 version of Verdi's "Macbeth" with none other than the talented Josephine Bairstow making the most of the part of the Lady.

But these acquisitions paled almost into insignificance beside the cornucopia of opera pouring from my television set. The source of this largesse was not the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which, with only a single TV channel to its name could only squeeze in a couple of full length operas a year, and certainly not from the three commercial channels, which were entirely given over to recent films, sport, game shows, soaps, and adverts, but from a channel called the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), which had been set up by an enlightened earlier government to meet the needs of the multicultural society which Australia prided itself on having now become. Like the ABC, SBS was blessedly advert free, although that was later to change, but, unlike the ABC, it was entirely committed to catering for minority tastes by screening programmes imported from non-English speaking countries, such as foreign language films, and, fortunately for me, operas, all beautifully subtitled in English by SBS's own team of experts.

I could hardly believe my luck. Virtually every Saturday afternoon on SBS was given over to the arts, with full-length operas featuring regularly, most of them unobtainable commercially with English subtitles, and eminently tapeable, therefore, for future viewing. Since this expansion of my collection went on for years, I will list only the most remarkable acquisitions, in no particular order of merit. They were Chabrier's "L'Etoile (Opera de Lyons, '86); Delius's "A Village Romeo and Juliet" (German Film, '89); Wagner's "Lohengrin" (Bayreuth '91), Parsifal (Bayreuth '98), "Tannhauser" (Munich '95), and "Tristan and Isolde" (Munich '98); Monteverdi's "The Return of Ulysses" (Henze's arrangement, Salzburg '85), and "The Coronation of Poppea" (Welsh National Opera '98); Prokofiev's "Love of Three Oranges" (Glyndebourne '82), and "Betrothal in a Monastery" (Kirov '98); Verdi's "Falstaff" (Salzburg '82), "Don Carlo" (Paris Chatelet '98), and "Force of Destiny (Kirov '98); Paisiello's "Nina, a woman driven mad by love" (Zurich '02); Rangstrom's "The Crown Bride" (Swedish Film); Martinu's "A Greek Passion" (Film '99); Weill's "The Rise and Fall of Mahogany" (Salzburg '98); Johann Strauss's "A Night in Venice" (Burgenland '99) and "Simplicius" (Zurich '99), Offenbach's "La Perichole" and "La Belle Helene" (both Paris '00); Richard Strauss's "Ariadne auf Naxos" (Dresden '00); Rameau's "Platee" (Paris '02) and "Les Boreades" (Paris '03); and two Zarzuelas from Madrid, "Louisa Fernanda" and "La Revoltosa".

As an added bonus, having two VCR/TVs in the house, I was able to share my good fortune with my erstwhile operagoing companion in England by taping an additional copy of each broadcast to send off to her. She, in her turn, began videotaping operas broadcast in the UK and sending them out to me. Which is how I came by, among other things, the Glyndebourne productions of Dove's "Flight" ('99) and "Fledermaus" ('03), Covent Garden's "Faust" ('04), and, eventually, the "Ring" of '03 to '06. But these later arrivals were some way in the future when my wife and I were persuaded by changes in our family circumstances to move from Woy Woy to another small coastal town, 400 miles to the north, called Ballina, which, although a pleasant enough place to live in, was more remote from civilisation, as we had hitherto known it, than we had ever been before. Which was a pity, because, I had recently renewed my acquaintance with the Sydney Opera House.

My interest had been re-awakened by the inclusion, in Australian Opera's 2002 season, of Shostakovich's "The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk", sung in English, and my realisation that every production at the opera house was given at least one Saturday matinee performance, which it would be much more convenient for me to attend than the evening ones, but, most of all, by my discovery that the seats in the front three rows of the stalls at the Opera House were significantly cheaper than those in the rows behind *because the surtitles could not be seen from them*. The outcome was very enjoyable indeed. Having worked my way, over a period of fifty years, from the cheapest possible seats in the house only as far as the back half of the dress circle, there I suddenly was, witnessing a full-blooded production of Shostakovich's great work, sung in English, from the middle of the second row of the orchestra stalls. My immersion in the piece, from curtain up to curtain down was total, and my pleasure was diluted only by the knowledge that this was how wealthier operagoers could normally afford to live. And, a few months later, it was given to me to repeat the experience with Opera Australia's excellent production of Offenbach's "Orpheus in the Underworld", also sung in English. Thank you, surtitles!

And thank you, surtitles, too, for making it possible for me to begin attending operas in languages other than English, albeit from a seat in some less privileged part of the house than the orchestra stalls. I was fated, however, to take advantage of these newfound delights on only one further occasion before going into exile in Ballina. It was a delightful Rossini double bill - "Il Signor Bruschino" and "La Scala di Seta" from which I

came away, as I do from all Rossini's operas, even the tragic ones, with a song in my heart. And I was home for dinner. What could be better?

For completeness, I should mention the one other live opera performance I attended in Sydney before heading north. In 2002, a new opera company had been formed "to give Sydney music lovers a different experience of opera". The Pinchgut Opera's stated aims were to "present works that are not well known - but should be - in smaller and more intimate spaces...than in a conventional opera theatre.. (and) give audiences the chance to see the work of younger Australian artists...who we believe...are on the edge of brilliant careers, but, who, in many cases, have not yet been recognised by major opera companies." I am quoting from the programme of their first production which, always on the look out for new operatic experiences, I had hastened to support on learning of Pinchgut's formation. It was Handel's "Semele" at the City Recital Hall, conveniently situated in the Sydney CBD.

It was obvious to me that the Pinchgut Opera's production owed much, although on a reduced and more economical scale, to that mounted by the ENO at the London Coliseum in 1999, which I had enjoyed repeatedly on video. This put me at something of a disadvantage *vis a vis* the audience around me, many of them quite young, who were enjoying its witty anachronisms for the first time. The Recital Hall was certainly "smaller and more intimate than a conventional opera theatre", but the fact that it had a concert platform instead of a proper stage, gave the production a rather makeshift flavour. Within these constraints, however, the performance was a very accomplished one, musically and dramatically, and the words were quite audible, but the timekeeping was lax, with the result that, after a distracting period of clockwatching in the middle of Act III, I was obliged to leave before the end in order to be sure of catching the last train to Woy Woy, which rather took the shine off the evening. I concluded that I would be more inclined to lend my future support to the Pinchgut Opera if I were a few years younger. In the event, the question didn't arise, and I'm happy to note that this highly commendable venture is currently surviving without me.

Following the move to Ballina, where I was more dependent on television opera than I had ever been before, matters took a distinct turn for the worse when a management upheaval at SBS led to a change in programming policy, which in turn led to the

resignation of the Network Programmer [Rod Webb] with whom I had struck up a fruitful correspondence while in Woy Woy. So impressed had I been by SBS's commitment to televising opera, that I had written to him expressing my appreciation of it, with the ulterior motive, I must confess, of persuading him to seek out certain opera performances which I knew existed on videotape, but were either deleted from the catalogues, or unavailable in PAL format with English subtitles. He responded, not only by thanking me for my suggestions and promising to pursue them, but also by enclosing a list of the sixteen operas he had scheduled for the forthcoming season, and promising to keep me informed of future developments. His departure was almost certainly a consequence of a government decision to require SBS to supplement its funding by showing advertisements for the first time, leading, inevitably, to a more aggressive pursuit of bigger audiences.

The end result, for me, was that the flow of opera from SBS slowed to a trickle, consisting mostly of repeats with very few new productions, but I continued to write to the new regime, urging them to do better, and offering suggestions to that end, which were always politely received and occasionally acted upon. Fortunately, however, this downturn in my operatic fortunes was mitigated by the arrival in the shops (mainly from China) of remarkably cheap TV sets and VCRs which were fully compatible with both PAL and NTSC. This development finally opened up to me the opera video catalogues of the USA, which, incidentally, I was by then equipped to access on the internet.

Able, at last, to get my hands on world class performances of operas, most of which I had never seen staged, for less than it would have cost me for a half-decent seat at a live performance, my first acquisition was the New York Met's sensational 1984 production of Berlioz' "Les Troyens", followed, in quick succession by Zandonai's "Francesca da Rimini" of the same year, then the San Francisco Opera productions of Saint-Saens "Samson and Delilah" (1981), Boito's "Mefistofele"(1989), and Meyerbeer's "L'Africaine"(1900); then Puccini's "Il Trittico"(1983) from La Scala, followed by his "La Fanciulla del West" (1983) from Covent Garden; then Poncielli's "La Gioconda"(1986) from the Vienna State Opera, Rossini's "La Gazza Ladra" (1987) from Cologne Opera, and Verdi's "Luisa Miller"(1988) and Offenbach's "La Vie Parisienne" (1991) from the Opera de Lyon, most of them lavishly staged, all of them beautifully sung, and some of them difficult to imagine being bettered.

Hardly had I emerged from the blissful daze induced by my indulgence in such rich fare, when yet another technological innovation promised to extend the boundaries of my experience still further. Digital video disc (DVD) recordings of operas had been available for some time, but began to engage my interest only when the price of DVD players (thanks, once again, to the Chinese) had reached such ridiculously low levels that it was no longer possible to ignore them. That, and the fact, of course, that DVD, given the superiority of its sound and vision reproduction, was rapidly replacing videotape as the vehicle for new issues. So, I jumped aboard the bandwagon and equipped myself to continue expanding my operatic horizons by acquiring, in alphabetical order, Mascagni's "L'Amico Fritz" (Livorno 2002), Gay's "Beggar's Opera" (BBCTV 1983), Richard Strauss's "Capriccio" (San Francisco 1993), Donizetti's "Don Pasquale" (Cagliari 2002), Wagner's "Flying Dutchman" (Bayreuth 1985), Mozart's "Idomeneo" (Glyndebourne 1983), Massenet's "Manon" (Paris 2001), Tchaikovsky's "Mazzeppa" (Kirov 1996), Offenbach's "Orpheus in the Underworld" (Brussels 1997), Rossini's "Turk in Italy" (Zurich 2002), "Voyage to Rheims" (Barcelona 2003), and "William Tell" (Milan 2004).

With the arrival of the DVD format, my explorations of the world of opera from the comfort of my own home have extended farther than I could possibly have anticipated when I first began tentatively to videotape opera broadcasts in England in the 1980s. And, although lacking in the sense of occasion enjoyed by members of an audience at a live performance, opera on video offers a number of distinct advantages over the real thing. Apart from the sheer convenience of having opera on tap whenever the need for it is felt, there is no better way of getting to know an opera than by experiencing it, repeatedly, at close quarters on video with the help of subtitles and a good sound system. And, even when living within reach of an opera house, there is no other feasible way of enjoying the productions of the rest of the world's opera houses, of works which may never be performed locally, and some of which are quite rare.

I now have over 200 different operas in my collection (Annexe B) plus additional versions of the more popular ones, e.g. five "Marriage of Figaro"s, and four "Cenerentola"s, and nothing better to do than spend my evenings watching them, and, although I try to give each of them its turn, I find myself screening some more frequently than others. Why? Because I like them better, of course. But what is it about these videos that makes

some of them more repeatedly enjoyable than others? Bear with me, finally, while I consider this question.

7

There are four elements in the realisation of an opera, whether on stage or video, which can affect the level of my enjoyment of it. They are: the words, the music, the production, and the actual performance, and, although the first of these tends to be seen by many operagoers as of less significance than the rest, without words there can be no opera. Wagner considered his words to be as important as his music, and was strongly in favour of having them translated into other languages. Verdi is reputed to have said, "Writing opera isn't difficult - all you need is a good libretto". And when the very first operas were conceived and performed in 17th century Italy, the name of the poet responsible for the words was given much greater prominence than that of the composer, even when the composer was Monteverdi. Since then, however, the words have ceased to enjoy the same independent (and lucrative) appeal as the music, and today, with few exceptions, the name of the librettist carries little weight with the operagoing public. But, it is still the fact that, in music-drama, the music is generated by the drama, and not the other way round.

The main ingredients of an opera libretto are the same, of course, as those of a play. Character and plot. The characters need to be sufficiently differentiated, one from another, to make them easily recognisable, and sufficiently true to life for us (and the composer) to care about what happens to them. They must also behave with a reasonable degree of credibility and consistency throughout the work. Brunhilde's betrayal of Siegfried in "Gotterdammerung" is a prime example of inconsistency, and I, personally, have always had difficulty in believing that a military commander of Othello's competence and experience would allow himself to be manipulated into slaughtering his beloved wife on the evidence of a lost handkerchief. Another character whose behaviour I find it hard to credit is Don Carlos in Verdi's "Force of Destiny", whose murderous pursuit of Don Alvaro and his own sister Leanora, in the name of family honour, borders, eventually, on the absurd. Unfortunately, the conduct of these individuals is crucial to the unfolding of the plot, whereas such implausibilities as Gilda's self-sacrifice in Verdi's "Rigoletto", and the suicide of Edgardo in Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor", coming, as they

do, towards the end of the opera, can do little to devalue what has gone before.

After credible characters and a plausible plot, the least one can expect from a music-drama must surely be that it contains enough dramatic activity per unit of time to justify its performance in a theatre, rather than, less expensively, in a concert hall. I have already confessed that, for me, a number of quite well-known operas, including three of Wagner's, fail this test, and, although the primary function of an opera plot has traditionally been to create opportunities for the composer to provide the characters with songs to sing, if these arias do nothing to take the story forward, or if they hold up the proceedings for too long, or both (as in Handel's operas), the dramatic impetus of the narrative, however well plotted, can be lost, and with it that voluntary suspension of disbelief upon which an audience's immersion in the stage illusion depends.

For sound commercial reasons, most opera plots have been derived from pre-existing works that have enjoyed some degree of popularity in their original form - first, the myths, legends, and histories of the ancient world, then, the plays and novels of the modern world - and the task of the librettist has been to mould this material into shapes compatible with the operatic conventions of the day, without losing the essence of the original. This could involve, either fleshing out the skeleton of a story, as in the various operatic versions of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, or extracting a thread of dramatic interest from a sprawling mass of romantic verbiage, as in Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor", which uses only a fraction of the content of Sir Walter Scott's novel. During the heyday of grand opera in the 19th century, particularly in Paris, the librettist was obliged, also, to provide excuses for spectacular crowd scenes involving the chorus, and even for a ballet, in order to placate those young men in the audience who had come to admire the legs of the dancers rather than the voices of the singers.

But the singers were the main attraction, of course, and the music they sang was of greater appeal to the audience than the underlying words, which may have been rewritten and reshuffled repeatedly by the librettist at the behest of the composer, whose requirements, once engaged in putting musical muscle on dramatic sinew, would be seen by both parties as paramount. The opera houses of the 19th century were not unlike the film studios of the 20th - dream factories dedicated to transforming artistic raw material into a commercially viable product, so the

overriding imperatives were as much economic as aesthetic. It was taken for granted that, in response to consumer demand, as expressed in bums on seats, the composers and their librettists would chop and change, cut and paste, revisit and revise their creations as often as was deemed necessary. Many, if not all, of the operas from that period which survive in today's repertoires, are the fruits of this process of trial and error. Works as diverse as Beethoven's "Fidelio" and Smetana's "Bartered Bride", for example, are the result of several re-writes over a number of years.

The search for suitable plots was not made easier by the existence, in many countries, of political censors, who deplored subversion of any kind and were deeply averse to allowing hereditary rulers to be maligned, let alone killed, on stage. Verdi's historical operas often fell foul of these inhibitions, resulting, for example, in the assassination of King Gustavus Adolphus III of Sweden, in "A Masked Ball", becoming, at one point, that of Riccardo, Earl of Warwick, Governor of Boston in colonial North America. And the fact that "A Masked Ball" is one of Verdi's better plotted operas may be due to the fact that his librettist, Antonio Somma, "borrowed" much of the text already provided by a more accomplished author, Eugene Scribe, for an earlier opera on the same subject by Daniel Auber - a not uncommon practice at the time. But, in spite of all the effort invested in them, only a small proportion of the hundreds of operas staged since the artform was invented have survived in the modern repertoire, and many of those have done so, in spite of inadequacies of character and vagaries of plot, which today's audiences are willing to overlook for the sake of the music.

While not denying that the music is of primary importance, however, I find it impossible to empathise with those opera lovers for whom the music seems to be all-important. I am intrigued by the fact that sound recordings of complete operas are still appearing, as I write, in greater numbers than are videos of operas, and I cannot help wondering about the people who buy them. Do they really sit and listen for hours to opera, sung in a variety of foreign languages, or do they buy recordings only of operas sung in their native tongues? Or do they listen only to operas with which they are already familiar, savouring memories of past experiences in the opera house? Are they hoping for singing of a higher order, or subtle variations in interpretation? Myself, I can enjoy listening to recordings of concert music, even works of considerable length, such as Mahler's symphonies, and I can enjoy listening to overtures,

arias, and choruses from operas, but I could bring myself to listen to a sound recording of a complete opera in a foreign language, only if some dire misfortune had separated me from all access to my videos. Perhaps this is a weakness in me, and I should envy those who can.

The existence of a body of operagoers who care only for the music and the quality of its performance may account for certain other phenomena which have puzzled me - the popularity of some operas I dislike, for example, and the unpopularity of others I like. It might even explain why opera productions, which have struck me as being so misconceived as to be positively counter-productive, have been greeted with storms of applause by audiences who should, in my view, have been demanding their money back on the grounds that the work they had witnessed bore little resemblance to the one advertised. Except for the music, of course, and it may be that an enthusiastic reception given to the sound of the performance by those in the audience who care about little else, can trigger off applause in others, who either know no better, or feel the need to justify, to themselves, the expense of being present, regardless of whether they have enjoyed themselves or not? At the other extreme, however, there may be opera lovers whose preference for a sound recording over the real thing is due to a chronic inability to overlook the visual incongruities that can occur in even the best productions.

There is no denying that minor defects in any of the different strands that are woven together in the staging of an opera can result in distractions of various kinds, but I, myself, have always found it possible to ignore minor imperfections of detail, if the production as a whole is sympathetic to the work as originally conceived. And, since few producers can claim to be as gifted as the individuals whose works they have been hired to produce, I have always assumed that an awareness of their inferior stature would ensure that they approached their task, not, of course, with their own creativity constrained by undue reverence, but, at least, with respect. I am happy to report that, in the hundreds of opera productions I have been privileged to witness in the last sixty-five years this expectation has, for the most part, been met. But, less frequently, I'm sorry to say, of late, due to the growth of the phenomenon of "Producer's Opera" where the producer's contribution to the work takes precedence over, and may bear little relation to, that of its progenitors.

I have to confess to feelings of complete bewilderment in the face of some of the productions I have witnessed in recent years, most of them videotaped, inexpensively, thank goodness, from telecasts, but all from reputable opera houses. The Germans have been the worst offenders, and Wagner the biggest loser, but I was particularly disappointed in a Hamburg 1999 production of Weber's "Der Freischutz" because this was one opera that never surfaced during my "London period", and I was keen to get to know it better. First performed in 1821, it was, at one time, perhaps the most popular opera in the world, and Weber's musical innovations in the spooky Wolf's Glen scene have been credited with initiating the Romantic Movement, which grew to dominate the world of music as the 19th century progressed. While not exactly verismo, its historical setting is reasonably precise (Bohemia after the Thirty Years War), and its characters tolerably flesh-and-blood. It has a plot which portrays a dramatic struggle between good and evil, with lots of good tunes and plenty of action. Conventionally produced as a singspiel opera, it places no obstacles in the way of audience involvement.

The Hamburg production was confusing in a number of ways. The setting of the first act bore little resemblance to "the outside of an inn in Bohemia", looking more like the inside of a warehouse in Hamburg, with, to the left of the stage, the sliding doors of a modern passenger lift, complete with illuminated indicator panel. The cast and chorus, however, were in approximately Bohemian attire, except for the Hermit who was dressed as a present day Japanese businessman and seated in the middle of the front row of the audience, from whence to hurl up onto the stage the bouquet of the white roses so essential to the survival of the heroine. Another major departure from the original was the frequent intrusion into the action of an additional character of pseudo-sinister appearance who was invisible to the rest of the cast. This individual arrived from below via the lift, and was meant, no doubt, to be a manifestation of the evil forces at work in the plot, but looked and behaved more like a mime artist who has wandered in from a nearby circus. The rest was too painful to dwell upon, except to reveal that, in the Wolf's Glen scene, the magic bullets were cast in a saucepan on a kitchen stove. A complete travesty, of course, but I'm stuck with it until something better comes along.

Less annoying, but only because I care less for the opera, was the Munich 1995 production of Wagner's "Tannhauser" in which

both "the magical mountain abode of Venus" and "the sunny valley near the castle of the Wartburg" were replaced by gloomy landscapes littered with ruins and bric-a-brac, Tannhauser wore the ankle length overcoat featured in so many of these "post-modern" productions and carried a suitcase (another recurrent theme) containing his manuscripts, Venus was clad in a cocktail gown, and the uncompromisingly medieval plot unfolded against a series of settings which did not in any way reflect the period. Equally nonsensical was the Munich 1998 production of Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde", Act One of which was set on a modern luxury yacht, with Isolde and Brangane reclining in deckchairs reading fashion magazines, and Tristan appeared with half his face lathered in shaving soap which remains in situ for the rest of the act. The last act was played out in what looked like the corner of a bedsitter.

The biggest disappointment of all was a Stuttgart production of Wagner's complete Ring Cycle telecast by SBS over ten weeks in 2003 - the only version of this monumental work yet to reach Australian TV screens. With my VCRs at the ready, I was hoping for a worthy successor to the 1990 Bavarian State Opera production, which I had videoed in England and viewed with such pleasure at regular intervals since, but, after sitting through "Rhinegold" and "Valkyrie", scarcely able to credit what I was seeing, I couldn't be bothered with the rest. The whole of Rhinegold was acted out against a single set, which looked like the foyer of a large hotel. The entire cast wore modern suits and frocks, and were difficult to differentiate, one from another, since there were no dwarves and no giants, and neither the words being sung, nor the spear, helmet, and sword, which figure so largely in the plot, seemed to relate to what was happening on the stage. The "Valkyrie" must have seemed equally incomprehensible to anyone not familiar with the original, but that did not prevent the audience from applauded madly.

When I wrote to SBS to complain about this gross misrepresentation of Wagner's operas, the Deputy Acting Network Programmer replied that "the Stuttgart production of the Ring Cycle, while taking many liberties in interpreting Wagner's work, has received numerous favourable reviews, particularly for its novel approach of employing different directors for each part" - all of them striving, apparently, to outdo each other in taking liberties. And, unfortunately, this tendency to take liberties seems to be

growing and spreading. In 2004, I arranged a visit to England to coincide with, among other things, a performance of the ENO's production of Berlioz' "The Trojans", at the London Coliseum. Given the quality of this work and the rarity of its performance, I was hoping for the experience of a lifetime, but it was not, alas, to be. My pleasure at encountering the whole of Berlioz' masterpiece in one evening for the first, and probably the last, time, was marred by the inadequacies of the production, which made little attempt to reproduce the Trojan and Carthaginian settings of the story, dressing the cast in either sweatshirts and jeans, or frocks and suits, depending on their social status, and requiring the Trojan women to jump, en masse, from the roof of a building.

By the following year, the rot had spread to Covent Garden, contaminating even their Ring Cycle, which I could not attend, of course, but which, obligingly televised by BBC2, was duly videotaped by my friend in London for my later delectation Downunder. Once again, however, my hopes were dashed. I was confronted by an all-star cast struggling with a no-star production, which took a succession of monstrous "liberties" with Wagner's original, starting with a modernistic all-purpose indoor setting, augmented, as required, by the addition of various bits of furniture and stage machinery to accommodate the demands of the plot. The Rhinemaidens covorted briefly in the nude (ooh!) until Alberich entered, in shirtsleeves and braces, paddling a canoe mounted on a monorail. Wotan also appeared in shirtsleeves, but more elegantly trousered and waistcoated in an Edwardian style favoured, also, with varying degrees of informality, by the other gods and goddesses, except for Loge, who was dressed as a solicitor's clerk. The giants were of human size and rather more Dickensian in their attire, with a hint of Lewis Carroll, in that Fasolt's hands and feet were twice the normal length, and Fafner's head was revealed to be of an equally elongated egg shape when he removed his stovepipe hat.

Nibelheim was represented as a brightly lit operating theatre cum torture chamber, littered with human body parts and partly dissected corpses, which were moved about, from time to time, by a white-coated Mime, for no apparent reason, other than to shock the audience. The Nibelung workers, in white hospital gowns, had staring eyes and shaven heads, and moved like zombies, the Tarnhelm was a Rubik cube, big enough to fit over Alberich's head, and his gold was carried up to the realm of the gods in

suitcases, as was he, in his miniaturised form. A permanent feature of the set was a silver ladder, hanging from the flies, down which, Brunhilde was obliged to make a precarious descent as the curtain rose on Act II of "The Valkyrie", before detaching herself from the rather conspicuous safety harness. The other valkyries were an unkempt lot, wild of eye, uncombed of hair, ragged of dress, all in black, like a coven of witches, sans helmets, sans shields, sans spears, sans everything, except for a few horse's skulls to toss around under the relentless flickering of strobe lighting. I felt sorry for the talented cast who, in addition to being dressed by Oxfam, were obliged by the producer to move restlessly about the cluttered set when not actually singing.

Confronted, yet again, by the failure of the contents to live up to the promise on the label, my only consolation was that the package had cost me very little money. In 2006, however, things took a turn for the worse during a visit to England, arranged, once again, to coincide with, among other things, a performance of Mozart's "forgotten" opera "La Finta Giardiniera" at Covent Garden. I had fond memories of the sparkling account of this charming piece, which the students of the Guildhall School of Music had given ten years previously, and welcomed the opportunity to renew my acquaintance with it under such auspicious circumstances. The previous year, during a similar visit to the UK, my friend and I had plunged on tickets for the Covent Garden production of Carl Nielsen's comic opera "Maskarade", sung in English, which we both enjoyed, and would be glad to encounter again sometime, but, in spite of it costing me a record 70 pounds, I was unhappy with the inferior position of my seat, and determined to do better for "La Finta". Booking well in advance on the internet, I found that suitable seats were available in the centre of the Balcony, but would cost us no less than 116 pounds! Each! But, after taking all the circumstances into account, my friend and I decided to bite the bullet.

It turned out to be an expensive mistake. The seats were excellent, of course, and the surtitles helpful, but the production was a complete dud. Mozart's teenage opera may not be as accomplished as his later works, but it is certainly not without merit. It is, however, an 18th century opera buffa with a complicated plot, which leans heavily on contemporary manners and mores, and needs all the help it can get from a sympathetic production to be comprehensible to a present-day audience. I find it difficult to see how anyone would hope to achieve this

objective by deploying a cast wearing frocks and suits in a modern setting, as on this occasion. The drabness of the costumes, the dinginess of the sets, and the incoherence of the motions being gone through on the stage, robbed the piece of any entertainment value. It was as if the production team had given up on the complexities of the 18th century setting in the expectation that the richness of Mozart's music would compensate for the poverty of their version of the libretto. If so, it was a miscalculation, because Mozart was still feeling his way to greatness in this piece, and the music was not quite up to carrying such a load.

Thus ended, in bitter disappointment, what might be my last experience of live opera. Fortunately. I have my videos to fall back on. But even there, I have to be careful how I spend my money, particularly where recent productions are concerned. I am always on the lookout for operas which are new to me, or not already in my collection, and had little hesitation in sending for the DVD of a 2003 revival of the "hugely successful" Vienna State Opera's production of Jacques Halevy's once popular but now rarely performed opera "La Juive" (Libretto Eugene Scribe) as soon as it became available. When first performed in Paris in 1835, this opera made the composer's name, earning praise from by both Verdi and Wagner, and remaining in the repertoires of the world's opera houses until the end of the century and beyond. Set in the city of Constance in the year 1414 where the Emperor Sigismund has called a religious council following his victory over the forces of the reformer, Jan Hus, it is a truly "Grand Opera", in five acts, featuring big crowd scenes, ill-fated lovers, and princes of both state and church. It also has a complicated and quite unbelievable plot, the main ingredients of which are bigotry, mendacity, and deception on the part of all the principal participants, except the eponymous heroine, Rachel, the daughter of a refugee Jewish goldsmith, Eleazar, whose sons have earlier been burnt at the stake under the Christian laws of the time. These laws continue to play a significant role in the plot and finally condemn Rachel to meet a similar fate, after which she is revealed by the vengeful Eleazar to be the long-lost Christian daughter of Cardinal Brogni, President of the Council, who, as a city magistrate in Rome, had been responsible for sending him into exile.

Before coming to this sad end, Rachel has enjoyed the attentions of a young, supposedly Jewish painter going under the name of Samuel, who is, in fact, none other than Prince Leopold, the emperor's son and commander of the victorious army, in disguise.

He is also a married man with children, and happens to be present at a Passover ceremony in Eleazar's humble abode when his wife, Princess Eudoxie, comes to buy a magnificent chain as a gift for her husband, the returning hero, and sets in train the unravelling of his deception. Suspicions aroused, Rachel follows him to the palace where, having been conveniently engaged as a servant by Princess Eudoxie, she is in a position to unmask her lover while he is being presented with the chain, which has been brought to the palace by Eleazar. Since Christian law prescribes death for both Leopold and Rachel for having relations with each other, the rest of the opera is taken up with Cardinal Brogni's attempts to extricate Leopold from this mess at Rachel's expense, during the course of which Eleazar informs Brogni that the daughter he thought had died in a fire back in Rome was rescued by, and is now in the care of, a Jew, but refuses to reveal her present whereabouts. Rachel, having saved Leopold by her testimony before the Council, declines to renounce her religion, and is executed in public, after which Eleazar triumphantly tells Brogni that she was his daughter.

The Vienna State Opera's production achieves the difficult feat of making this unlikely story even more confusing by bringing it forward into the 20th Century and using an all-purpose, split-level set, backed by rows of glass doors which open, as required, to admit, either a chorus clad in vaguely Tyrolean costumes, or characters wearing black frocks and suits on the lower deck (Eleazar's home), and white gowns and uniforms on the upper deck (the palace). All very stylish, but not much help in unravelling the medieval complexities of the plot for anyone encountering it for the first time. My own complaint is that an item sold to me as "La Juive" by Hanlevy and Scribe, has turned out to be "La Juive" by someone else, but I cannot ask for my money back, even though, having viewed it once, I find myself with little inclination to do so again, since the music, although beautifully sung, is not sufficiently appealing to distract me from the irritations of the production. And, unfortunately, there seems to be no reliable source of advance information about the extent to which the production team of any opera for sale on video have devalued the work of the creative team, under whose names the product is being sold.

It is a pity that the golden rule of medicine, "First, do no harm", does not apply also to the production of operas, where the primary objective should surely be to present the original material as persuasively as possible, within the limits of the

resources available. This does not mean that liberties cannot be taken with the costumes and settings, but it does mean that this should only be done to enhance the credibility of the original, maximising its strengths and minimising its weaknesses. Obviously, comic operas can survive drastic reworking better than tragic ones, given that our emotions can become more deeply engaged in the latter, and this involvement can all too easily be disrupted by the sorts of gimmicks that might seem quite amusing in the former.

This still leaves plenty of scope for ingenuity and creativity in the staging of the operas of the past. Both the 1970s ENO Ring Cycle of fond memory, and the 1990 Bavarian State Opera's version I have on video, used settings which were at some remove from those prescribed by Wagner, but they did not subvert the narrative, or distort the characters. Even quite radical revisions, such as David Pountney's ENO "Rusalka" (1983), can be acceptable when they offer a credible interpretation of a fairy tale, some features of which might be difficult to realise convincingly on a stage. The French opera companies seem to be much better than their German counterparts at producing old operas in novel but acceptable ways. Paris Opera, for example, have done wonders with the works of Rameau (1683-1764). Their 2003 production of his "Les Boreades" gives an ingenious and quite spectacular account of a Greek myth of no little obscurity, as does their 2002 version of his ballet-bouffon "Platee" which, however, being a comedy, presented them with less of a challenge. The operas of Gluck (1714-1787), too, respond well to this type of imaginative but respectful treatment, and I have found their 2000 production of his "Alceste" eminently re-watchable, as have I the Paris Chatelet Theatre's "Orphee et Euridice". On the other hand, the Chatelet's 2003 production of Berlioz' "Les Troyens" takes as many liberties with the original as did the ENO 2004 version, if to more stylish effect, and their 2006 version of Rameau's "Les Paladins" is rendered virtually incomprehensible by a non-stop fireworks display of special effects. So, perhaps the virus is still spreading.

Obviously, operas using myths, fables and fairy tales lend themselves better to re-working than those purporting to depict real life situations, but deliberate anachronisms, wherever they occur, cannot but raise distracting questions in the mind of the beholder. Attempts to transport modern audiences into imaginary worlds, where archaic weaponry is wielded by men in suits, or modern weapons are brandished in ancient conflicts, and where

pure, unselfish love is avowed, and chastity defended to the death by ladies in fashionable frocks, nylon stockings and high heeled shoes, seem so misguided that one can only assume that the motivation behind them has been, not to make the best of the original material, but simply to do something with it that is different from anything done before. Can it be that, in the absence of new operas, the opera houses feel obliged to justify their existence by staging old operas in new guises, overlooking the fact that their own familiarity with these works may not be shared by their audiences, some of whom will be meeting them for the first time? I sometimes wonder, when confronted by one of these extreme makeovers, how it would be received by a fifteen-year-old youth on his first visit to the opera. Would it bewitch him into longing for more? I doubt it, and would indeed maintain that, for the future of opera, the need to persuade any newcomers in the audience to become life members of it should be borne in mind whenever a new production of an old opera is being planned, particularly by opera houses which benefit from subsidisation by the state?

Ironically, however, apart from the admirable productions emerging at regular intervals from St Petersburg's Kirov Opera over the years, it is to an unsubsidised Glyndebourne, which few young people can afford to patronise, and a far off USA, where state subsidies are anathema, that we must look for the least controversial stagings of the operas of the past. Perhaps there is a connection. When criticised by Igor Stravinsky for his lack of adventurousness in mounting new productions, Rudolph Bing, Director of the New York Metropolitan Opera, replied that, having no other source of finance but his subscribers, he could not afford to take risks, adding "My colleague in Hamburg is very adventurous and the press love him and he plays to empty houses and the state pays. But in America the state does not pay." I myself have found little cause to complain about any of the many American opera productions which feature in my collection. Those from the Met and San Fransisco are outstanding, of course, but those from places like Houston, Chicago, and Dallas, are never less than convincing.

The same can be said of my numerous Glyndebourne videos, with the exception only of the one in which Debussy's "Pelleas et Melisande" is re-located from the imaginary kingdom of Allemonde to an Edwardian country house where Goland discovers a completely naked Melisande hiding under a dust cover on top of a grand piano in the library. Why cannot works which are deliberately allegorical, such as this one (and Wagner's Ring,

of course), be left to speak for themselves, *allegorically*, as intended, without presumptuous predigestion by some pretentious producer? As for the rest, I feel that my not inconsiderable experience as a consumer of opera (if only, nowadays, on video) entitles me to ask the opera producers of the future, when letting their imaginations loose on the operas of the past, to bear in mind the fifteen-year-old first-timers in the audience, and at least do no harm.

8

Thus unburdened, let me turn, with some relief, to the actual performances enshrined in my collection, where, happily, there is much to admire and little to criticise. Indeed, I count myself extremely fortunate to have lived at a time when the performances of so many talented opera singers in so many operas have been captured on video. We refer to them as opera singers, but, nowadays, when they are expected, not only to sing the part, but also to act the part, and look the part (even in close-up), the term does them less than justice. Looking round the world of art and entertainment (including even sport), I can see no other activity that makes greater demands on mind and body than does a major role in a public performance of a full length opera. "How do they do it?" I ask myself, "All those words (often in languages not native to them), all that music - the singing, the acting, how do they make it look and sound so natural?" My taste for opera being what it is, I derive my satisfaction from the fusion of its different elements, not looking for excellence in any of them, but I am grateful whenever the better displaces the merely good, and there are some performers whose talents are, in all respects, so superlative that one can only gaze at them in awe.

Beginning with the tenors, has there ever been, and can there ever be, another to compare with Placido Domingo? His voice, appearance, acting, musicianship and apparently inexhaustible stamina have secured him many more appearances in my collection than any other artist. He is Samson ('81), Canio ('82 and '98), Turridio ('82), Ernani and Dick Johnson ('83), Paolo, Aeneas, and Andre Chenier ('84), Don Jose ('85), Cavaradossi ('85 and '92), Enzo, Goya, and Otello ('86), Vasco ('88), Ramades ('89), Loris and Stiffelio ('93), Hoffman ('97), Loris and Herman ('99). What a talent, and seemingly so modest about it. His colleagues in the "Three Tenors" are nothing like as well represented, Luciano Pavarotti appears as Nemorino ('81), Ramades ('83), The Duke of Mantua (?84), Gustavus Adolphus (?85) and Rudolfo ('89),

and Jose Carreras only as Stiffelio ('93). Although not quite so great of voice, Paul Frey is elegantly effective as Sir Huon ('86), Walther ('86), and Lohengrin ('91), and Philip Langridge totally convincing as Idomeneo ('83), Laca ('89), Tito ('91), Grimes ('94) and David (?90s). Robert Tear, an even lighter tenor, deserves a mention for his characterisations of Loge ('90), and Captain Vere ('94), and many minor roles in Covent Garden and Glyndebourne productions over the years, such as Valdachi ('85).

Nobody is to the baritones, what Placido Domingo is to the tenors, but there are several world class talents to be found, such as Robert Hale as Wotan (1990); Ruggero Raimondi as Dulcamara ('81) Scarpia ('92 and '01)) and Selim ('02); Thomas Allen as The Forrester ('81 and '95), Marcello ('82), Ulysses ('85), the Don ('88), and Eisenstein ('03); Thomas Hampton as Guglielmo (?85), the Dark Fiddler ('89), Posa ('98), Hamlet ('00), and Macbeth ('01); Willard White as the Speaker ('78), the King of Clubs ('82), Ismailov ('87), Porgy ('93), and the Dutchman ('97); and Bryn Terfel as Joachaanan ('97), Falstaff and Figaro ('99), Scarpia ('01), Mephistopheles ('04), and Wotan ('05). The bass voice is called upon for few major roles in opera, but when it is, Robert Lloyd as Bluebeard ('88) and Boris ('90); and Samuel Ramey as Mefistofele and Nick Shadow ('89), can make these parts their own, and there are plenty of minor roles to be filled by basses such as Gwynne Howell, admirable as Colline ('82), and many other characters in Glyndebourne and Covent Garden productions over the years.

Much as I admire the male opera singers, however, my highest regard is reserved for the ladies, because I feel that the demands made on them are even greater than those made on the men, partly by the singing, since words are more difficult to articulate in the upper register, but mainly by the parts they are called upon to play. Almost every opera plot ever conceived revolves, to some extent, around the sexual attractiveness of a hero and heroine, but the outward appearance of the former can be the subject of much less open admiration than his noble bearing, bravery, prowess, rank, and fame, attributes which are not as difficult to simulate as those of an Adonis, whereas the physical charms of the heroine excite frequent praise, and her outstanding beauty can often be a mainspring of the plot. Not only that, but, in response to the greater emotional pressures to which she can be subjected, the role of the heroine often calls for a wider range of acting skills than that of the hero - compare Violetta with Alfredo,

for example, Tosca with Cavaradossi, Dido with Aeneas, Aida with Ramades, Carmen with Don Jose, Lucia with Edgardo, to name but a few.

We are doubly fortunate, then, in having in our midst so many heavenly creatures capable of responding to these challenges, if not, perhaps, as quite the beauties that some of them are, then as the possessors of enough feminine allure to satisfy the requirements of the libretto. Among the latter I would place, in no particular order of merit, Maria Ewing as Rosina ('82), Carmen (? '85), and Salome ('92); Felicity Lott as Pamina ('78), Helena ('81), Christine ('83), Anne ('89), and Helen ('00); Hildegard Behrens as Brunnhilde ('90); Josephine Barstow as Lady Macbeth ('72) and Katerina Ismailova ('87); Ileana Cotrubas as Tytania ('81), Mimi ('82), and Ninetta ('87); Cecilia Bartoli as Cinderella ('88), Nina, and Donna Florilla ('02), Eva Marton as Giaconda ('86), and Turandot ('94), Elizabeth Soderstrom as Fidelio ('80), Juliana Bordereau ('88), and The Countess ('99); and Titiana Troyanos as Dido ('83) and Clairon ('93). Excelling these in pulchritude, if not in other respects, are Ashley Putman as Arabella ('84); Kiri Te Kanawa as the Marschellin ('85), Donna Elvira ('88) and Countess Madelaine ('93); Barbara Bonney as Sophie ('85) and Alphise ('03); Renee Fleming as Manon ('02) and Blanche ('?); Yvonne Kenny as Ilea ('83) and Hanna Glawari ('02); and Carol Neblett as Minnie ('83), but, the golden apple, if ever I was privileged to award it, would go to Catherine Malfitano, whose voice, dramatic skills, and bewitching features have enabled her to fill roles as diverse as Cleopatra ('91), Tosca ('92), Lina ('93), Salome ('97), and Jenny ('98) to as near perfection as I can hope ever to encounter.

Some of the world's greatest singers do not appear above because they are not represented in my collection, but I have to confess that two supreme artists have been omitted for other reasons. Neither is male, of course, since the men are rarely called upon to approximate to physical perfection (an obvious exception being Jochaanan in "Salome" who is required to be not only beautiful but thin, making him Bryn Terfel's least accommodating role to date), but the women often are, and the stage illusion can all too easily be shattered if they do not. I can still recall the faint shock I experienced when the loveable but large Rita Hunter made her first entry as Brunnhilde in the ENO's 1970 "Valkyrie", but, from my seat in the distant Balcony, her personal charm, magnificent voice, and commitment to the role soon came to outweigh her inappropriate physique. The benefits

of distance are, unfortunately, not available to the divas appearing in my videos, and, much as I admire Joan Sutherland, both as a singer and as a person, I find it very difficult to see in her the kind of beauty that men are willing to die for when she appears as Leanora ('83), Anna Bolena ('84), Lucia ('86), and Hanna Glawari ('88), nor, given her formidable stage presence and serene demeanor, as the vulnerable victim of villainous intrigue, struggling with her feminine frailty. As Marguerite de Valois ('84), and Madame Lidoine ('90), however, she is magnificent.

I have an even bigger problem with Jessye Norman as Cassandra in the Met's otherwise faultless production of "Les Troyens" ('83). I bow to none in my admiration of her vocal artistry, and will always treasure the memory of her sublime performance of Strauss's "Four Last Songs" at a Prom Concert in the Royal Albert Hall; and she is, in her statuesque way, a very handsome woman, but I simply cannot see her as a tragic Trojan prophetess, daughter of King Priam, and virgin bride-to-be of Coroebus. And the fact that she is black makes it even more difficult for me to take her seriously in the part. This is not racial prejudice, but aesthetic sensitivity. I would feel the same about a white man playing Porgy or Othello without blacking up. And this is not an isolated case, since coloured singers are appearing on the scene in increasing numbers with world class voices which qualify them to fill operatic roles, the vast majority of which are depictions of white Europeans. Willard White, for example, has a magnificent voice, but looks out of place as the Speaker and the Dutchman, and simply laughable as the King of Clubs, father of the pallid Prince.

Much depends on the amount of colour the role can stand, of course. The excellent Shirley Verrett can be right as Selika ('88) and Delilah ('81), but wrong as Lady Macbeth (? '85), and black faces cropping up in minor roles, such as Fenton ('99), Anne ('95), and the Russian Count Libenskof ('03) can be very unsettling. What prevents these artists, I wonder, from making themselves up to look the part in the conventional theatrical manner? Is it racial pride? Political correctness? Whatever the reason, my inability to ignore visible incongruities between the performer and the character being portrayed arises, not from a pedantic fastidiousness, but from the fragility of the magic bubble I inhabit whenever the words, music, production and performance of an opera combine to cast their unique spell over me. And I cannot believe that I am alone in this.

So, here I sit, in this remote corner of New South Wales, with little to entertain me in the evening of my days - Australian television being what it is - but my ever-growing collection of operas on video. Since beginning these memoirs I have discovered, on the internet, that there are organisations in the USA selling cheap copies of unauthorised video recordings of television broadcasts of operas from all over the world, only one of which, however, Premiere Opera, has proved to be completely reliable. The quality is variable, depending usually on the date of the original telecast, but is always truthfully described in the catalogue entry. Only a small proportion of these performances are sung or subtitled in English, of course, but, of these, I have, to date, acquired about 30 for as little as \$US10 apiece. Yes, \$10 each! Plus postage, of course. My policy, at first, was to buy only those operas I had either never witnessed, or which were not already represented in my collection, but I couldn't resist a "Stiffelio" (Met '93) with Placido Domingo, a "Faust" ('79) with Freni, Kraus, and Ghiaurov, and an ROH 2005 production of "The Barber", all subtitled in English.

All these acquisitions are listed at Annexe B, but I was particularly pleased to get hold of the Scottish Opera's definitive 1988 "Candide", produced by Jonathan Miller with Leonard Bernstein conspicuous in the audience (and Anne Howard perfect as the Old Lady). Other comedic delights, all sung in English, are Rimsky Korsakov's "Coq d'Or" (Glasgow'80), and "Christmas Eve" (Bloomington'78), "The Adventures of Mr. Broucek" (Indiana'82), and a quaint old Opera Australia production of "Fra Diavolo" ('77) featuring several familiar faces in their relative youth. Of more serious interest, however, are Samuel Barber's "Anthony and Cleopatra" (Chicago '91) with Catherine Malfitano and Richard Cowen as the ill-fated pair, and "Vanessa" (USA'79); Argento's "Aspern Papers" (Dallas'88) with Elizabeth Soderstrom and Frederica von Strade; and Aaron Copland's "Tender Land" (USA'79) conducted by the composer. These are operas I had never come across before, and I was delighted to find that these shiny discs held words, music, productions, and performances that I could happily revisit at regular intervals.

As for the rest of my videos, viewing them, as I do, almost nightly, I find that there are about 150 of them I can visit repeatedly with varying degrees of pleasure - far too many to

comment upon individually here, but if I mark, in Annexe B, those I run occasionally *, regularly **, and frequently ***, it will serve as a measure of my estimation of their worth and allow me to refer only to those cases where my opinion may seem controversial. Since it is my practice to alternate serious operas with lighter ones, and the latter are fewer in number, I find myself viewing them more frequently, but, fortunately, they seem to stand up to repeated exposure better, which may be why the composer who has given me the most pleasure over the years has been Rossini, my admiration for whose talents increases with familiarity. Even his serious operas wear well, if given a chance, as Glyndebourne's '95 production of "Ermione" revealed, although the Scala 1988 production of "William Tell" is a little too gimmicky to do the opera justice. I admire everything of his I have encountered, but my favourite Rossini opera is "La Cenerentola". It has everything - characters, plot, words and heavenly music simply pouring out from beginning to end - solos, duets, trios, quartets, quintets, and, oh, that male voice choir! I have accumulated four versions of it, only one of which (ROH 2000) is a dud, and for the usual reasons - a drab mid-20th century setting in which the fairy tale plot makes little sense.

Hard on Rossini's heels come light-hearted contributions from other great composers, and from some who may be less than great, but have attained immortality through the prayers of many. Based entirely on my own tastes and experience, but allowing only one work from each composer, my list of the best of such operas, is as follows: (* means never experienced "live")

Rameau's "Platee" (1745)*
Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" (1786)
Rossini's "La Cenerentola" (1817) *
Weber's "Oberon" (1826) *
Donizetti's "L'Elisir D'Amore" (1832) *
Offenbach's "La Belle Helene" ... (1864)
Smetena's "The Bartered Bride" (1866)
Wagner's "Die Meistersinger" (1868)
Johan Strauss's "Die Fledermaus" (1874) with reservations
Chabrier's "L'Etoile" (1877)
Gilbert & Sullivan's "The Mikado" (1885)
Verdi's "Falstaff" (1893)
Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel" (1893)
Rimsky Korsakov's "Christmas Eve" (1895)
Lehar's "The Merry Widow" (1905)
Nielsen's "Maskarade" (1906)

Ravel's "L'Heure Espagnole" (1911)
Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi" (1918)
Janacek's "The Adventures of Mr. Broucek" (1920) (since the
"Cunning Little Vixen" ends tragically)
Torroba's "Luisa Fernanda" (1932) *
Richard Strauss's "Arabella" (1933) (Why not "Rosenkavalier" or
"Ariadne"?)
Prokofiev's "A Betrothal in a Monastery" (1946) * (much as I
admire "Three Oranges", I think this is one of the best comic
operas ever written)
Bernstein's "Candide" (Edinburgh version) (1957) *
Britten's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (1960)

My doubts about "Die Fledermaus" arise from the weakness of the
third act. The plot unwinds convincingly enough, once Frosch's
tomfooleries have run their course, but, compared with the
previous two acts, the musical content seems disappointingly
thin, which doesn't, of course, prevent me from enjoying the
first two acts. My problem with "Der Rosenkavalier" is that,
although the second act is a gem, opening, as it does, with one
of the most sublime of all "authentic operatic experiences", I
find the first act far too long, given the amount of plot
material it contains, with too many irrelevances cluttering up
the stage, and the last act is a bit too slapstick for its own
good, and leaves the Marschelin's sudden appearance as a *Dea ex
machina*, totally unexplained. "Ariadne auf Naxos" would be a
candidate for inclusion, if the three live versions I have
attended had succeeded in pulling the contrivances of the plot
together convincingly. This is one opera that plays better, I
find, on video with subtitles. In the stylish Dresden (2000)
version, words, music, production, and performance combine to
make everything finally clear. "Arabella" may not contain
anything quite as moving as the presentation of the silver rose,
or the arias in "Ariadne", but the characters and plot are
credible, the 19th Century Viennese setting convincing, and
both words and music unfold beguilingly.

It only remains for me to produce a similar list of my favourite
serious operas, allowing, again, only one work per composer, as
follows:

Monteverdi's "Incoronazione di Poppea" (1642)
Rameau's "Les Boreades" (written c.1761 but not performed
until 1962!)
Gluck's "Orphee et Eurydice" (1762)
Mozart's "Don Giovanni" (1787)

Beethoven's "Fidelio" (1814)
 Weber's "Der Freischutz" (1821)
 Rossini's "William Tell" (1829) *
 Donizetti's "Lucia di Lamermoor" (1835) *
 Verdi's "La Traviata" (1853)
 Gounod's "Faust" (1859)
 Berlioz' "Les Troyens" (1863?)
 Meyerbeer's "L'Africaine" (1865) *
 Boito's "Mefistofele" (1868) *
 Wagner's "Die Walkure" (1870)
 Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov" (1874) with reservations
 Bizet's "Carmen" (1875)
 Saint-Saens' "Samson and Delilah" (1877) *
 Tchaikovski's "Eugene Onegin" (1879)
 Offenbach's "Tales of Hoffman" (1881)
 Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci" (1892)
 Massenet's "Werther" (1892)
 Giordano's "Andrea Chenier" (1896) *
 Chabrier's "Louise" (1900)
 Puccini's "Tosca" (1900)
 Delius' "A Village Romeo and Juliet" (1901) *
 Dvorak's "Rusalka" (1901)
 Debussy's "Pelleas et Melisande" (1902) with reservations
 Janacek's "Jenufa" (1904)
 Richard Strauss's "Salome" (1905)
 Zandonai's "Francesca da Rimini" (1914) *
 Rangstrom's "The Crown Bride" (1915) *
 Bartok's "Duke Bluebeard's Castle" (1918)
 Korngold's "Die Tote Stadt" (1920) *
 Berg's "Wozzeck" (1925) with reservations.
 Stravinsky's "Oedipus Rex" (1927)
 Weill's "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny" (1927)
 Shostakovitch's "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" (1934)
 Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" (1935) *
 Prokofiev's "War and Peace" (1945)
 Britten's "Peter Grimes" (1945)
 Poulenc's "Les Dialogues des Carmelites" (1957)
 Martinu's "A Greek Passion" (1959) *
 Barber's "Anthony and Cleopatra" (1990) *

My reservations about "Boris Godunov" arise from the libretto. I find it difficult to accept the advancement of Grigory from the obscurity of a monk's cell to the Russian throne, after escaping (via a pub window) to the Polish court, where he is welcomed as a suitable husband for a princess. This unlikely story is, admittedly, redeemed by the wonderful score and the

Russian scenes, but I find Mussorgsky's "Khovanshchina" a more convincing opera, taken as a whole. My reservations about Debussy's "Pelleas et Melisande" are more difficult to explain. It's a musical masterpiece, weaving a web of enchantment around the characters and the words they sing, and I have fallen under its spell more than once at the London Coliseum, but in spite of the fact that the Welsh National Opera version I have on video (Boulez conducting) leaves little to be desired, I find it difficult to watch without falling asleep! This is one of the hazards of the armchair viewing of opera on video, but it cannot be due, in this case, to the dramatic inertia that makes some of Wagner's operas irresistibly soporific, since, here, there is a continuous thread of (admittedly low key) interaction between the characters in no less than thirteen short scenes. The problem is, I think, that Maeterlinck's characters are so two-dimensional that the interaction between them is too uninvolved to hold my interest when sitting comfortably, after dinner, in my own home. Berg's "Wozzeck" is another opera I have found it easier to enjoy in the theatre than on video, but the difficulty here is the music. I can admire it, but it is so academically "compositional" that it tends to distance me from the action rather than drawing me into it. I feel the same about "Lulu", where, once again, affect has been sacrificed to form.

It may seem odd that, although nearly half of the works in the above lists were premiered in the twentieth century, very few of them appeared during the second half, when the popularity of opera seemed, in the aftermath of World War II, to be on the increase. But this resurgence was deceptive. In the world outside the opera house, during the same period, the audiences for other forms of entertainment were growing at a much greater rate, ensuring that, in relative terms, the popularity of opera was actually declining. When pondering the dearth of successful new operas, it has to be borne in mind that the genre was developed as a form of entertainment before film, radio, and television existed, and was, for two centuries, as commercially viable as are these other forms today, offering composers whose present reputations derive from orchestral works which earned them barely enough to live on during their lifetimes, the only chance of making real money. So much so that, by the end of the 19th^h century, many composers were devoting themselves almost entirely to opera, creating other works on the side, as it were. During the 20th century, however, as the commercial competitiveness of the new forms of entertainment increased, opera became less financially rewarding than other genres, e.g. incidental film music.

And the audience appeal of new operas was not improved when 20th century composers began to speak in musical languages that even dedicated concertgoers found difficult to understand, or which seemed better suited to ballet than to opera. Another setback was the arrival on the scene, early in the century, of the jazz idiom, infusing so much new life into popular song and dance music that the entities responsible for its creation and dissemination have never stopped growing in fame and fortune since. From the outset, one of the principal vehicles for these effusions was a type of theatrical production usually referred to as a Musical. Consisting originally of a simple plot-line stringing together a number of songs, which, if well received, could go on to lead lives of their own after the original show had been forgotten, musicals developed in dramatic cohesion and musical sophistication until they dominated the world of entertainment to an even greater extent than opera had done in the previous century, appealing, especially when made into films (as they almost invariably were), to global audiences drawn from all walks of life, some members of which would almost certainly have patronised the opera houses of yesteryear. Although this was a genre dealing more in comedy than tragedy, it often explored quite serious themes in witty and ingenious ways, and, on the basis purely of my own enjoyment of them, I would venture to predict that many of the later twentieth century musicals will still be around when most of the operas composed during the same period have been forgotten. This is not to imply that musicals, with their essentially superficial approach to the human condition, can fill the deeper needs once met by serious operas, but rather that modern operas seem unable to do so.

The economics do not help. Our concert halls can resound to the works of earlier centuries, without excluding modern works from their programmes, and our art galleries can exhibit the masterpieces of the past, side by side with examples of modern art, since these additions to the inherited "repertoire" can be made at little extra cost, and negligible financial risk. Unfortunately, however, the only way to test-market a new opera, is to invest at least as much money, talent, and effort in the production of it, as would be required to re-stage an older work with a better chance of attracting audiences, thus doubling the potential loss. Perhaps we should recognise that circumstances have conspired to make opera, at least for the time being, an unsuitable vehicle for combining contemporary music and drama,

and concentrate such resources as are available on opera's past strengths rather than its present weakness. There is little evidence, after all, that audiences are crying out for new operas, and even less evidence that, without them, the opera industry would collapse. The impetus for innovation seems to come from within the music establishment itself, spurred on by an axiomatic belief that composers should be encouraged to express themselves in new and different ways and that opera houses have a duty to educate their audiences to appreciate these efforts, however unappealing they may seem to be on first acquaintance.

There is also, I suspect, an elite of non-performing professionals working in the opera world, in whom an over-familiarity with the existing repertoire of a few dozen operas, endlessly repeated all over the globe, fuels an appetite for new operas that is not experienced by the vast majority of opera lovers, and motivates also, perhaps, those dysfunctional productions of older operas which I, for one, find so repellent. While not entirely out of sympathy with their predicament, I would suggest that the cure for it is not to commission "confrontational" new operas, or mount "challenging" new productions, but to sift through the hundreds of operas produced in the past which, while not up to the standard of those surviving in the present repertoire, were not unsuccessful in their day, and might repay *sympathetic* revival - Hanley's "La Juive", for example, and Mozart's "La Finta Giardiniera"! They may not enjoy critical acclaim, or be quite as entertaining as the operas in the popular repertoire, but could have a wider audience appeal than many of those being written today.

But, in spite of all these obstacles, new operas continue to be commissioned and performed at regular intervals, and, thanks to the availability, on the internet, of those ridiculously cheap unauthorised copies of bygone telecasts, I have been able to access many of these modern works without financial risk or inconvenience, and am happy to admit that some of them appear to have been written to appeal to the discerning opera lover rather than the critical avant garde, notably Copland's "The Tender Land", Adamo's "Little Women", Argento's "The Aspern Papers", Barber's "Anthony and Cleopatra" and "Vanessa", Bernstein's "Candide", Menotti's "Goya", Hoiby's "Summer and Smoke", Previn's "A Streetcar Named Desire" and Dove's "Flight". I have enjoyed some of these acquisitions more than others, of course, finding the quality of the libretto, rather than the music, which is never less than appealing, to be the deciding factor in

inclining me to revisit each new work after the first encounter. It seems that, in the absence of the great arias and other set pieces that enlivened the proceedings in earlier works, credibility of plot and character assume an even greater degree of importance than before in engaging my interest. It seems also, on the evidence of my own responses, that novels, like "The Aspern Papers" and (rather to my surprise) "Little Women" lend themselves better to operatic treatment than stage plays such as "Summer and Smoke" and "A Streetcar Named Desire", which, having been carefully crafted to achieve maximum emotional impact in their original form, leave little for the music to add, whereas the action in a novel, taking place, as it does, in the mind of the individual reader, offers much more scope for musical refinement, reinforcement, and elucidation. I find it difficult to avoid the conclusion, also, that a musical idiom which appeals to the mass of ordinary operagoers is unlikely to lend itself readily to any form of contemporary dramatic realism. It can be no accident that the vast majority of successful operas have been based on libretti set in the past, which, as we all know, is another country where things are done differently and magic spells are easier to weave.

If I applied my acid test and asked myself which of the above operas I would pay to see performed live in the theatre, in the highly unlikely event of such an opportunity presenting itself, I would name only "Little Women", "The Aspern Papers", "Anthony and Cleopatra", "Candide" (Edinburgh Version), and "Flight". But, given the reality of my present circumstances, my own preference would be for more of my favourite operas to be made into films, using the remarkable technical resources now available to film makers, as a way of bringing them to wider audiences outside the opera houses, if not in cinemas, then on TV and video. Most of the videos in my collection are of staged performances, filmed in established opera houses, but quite a few of the most appealing have been filmed, more or less naturalistically, in the real world. A good example is Petr Weigl's 1989 version of Delius's "A Village Romeo and Juliet" which takes the story out of doors to very telling effect, into the farms and fields, the town fair and tavern, the Paradise Garden, of course, and finally the barge on the river. It all works beautifully, even though the soundtrack was recorded before the film was made and the parts of the two youthful protagonists are played by actors miming to the voices of the singers. Equally effective, is the 1999 film of Martinu's "A Greek Passion" which takes place in a very authentic looking Greek village and its surrounding countryside, and was again

recorded separately. For the venture to be worthwhile, however, a certain amount of realism and authenticity is essential. I have a film of Massenet's "Werther" in which the costumes and settings are cloyingly over-romanticised, and another of Gounod's "Romeo and Juliette" shot in the picture-postcard environs of a Bohemian castle on a pristine lake. Totally uninvolving, both of them. Not so, however, a grittily realistic French film of Verdi's "Macbeth", which looks as though it was shot in the bleakest of medieval Scotlands, warts and all.

Obviously, the operas lending themselves best to this kind of treatment would be those most difficult to realise convincingly on the stage. Dvorak's "Rusalka" springs immediately to mind, followed by Berlioz' "The Damnation of Faust", but the most attractive candidate must surely be none other than Wagner's Ring Cycle, with its Rhinemaidens, dwarves, giants, gods, dragons, valkyries, magic fire, and final conflagration. Wouldn't it be wonderful to see the whole thing played out in the actual settings specified by Wagner, using the best voices in the world, the most talented actors, and the technical resources available to the makers of, say, the recent film version of Tolkien's "Lords of the Ring" trilogy? And, given that there are many excellent recorded versions of the score already available for use, would it be too expensive to recoup its cost? The soundtrack of "A Greek Passion" was recorded in 1981, but the film wasn't shot until 1999 - in Croatia! I offer this suggestion free of charge, in the hope that I may live to see it acted upon by some enterprising entrepreneur. Please.

Annex A

OPERAS ATTENDED FROM c.1970 ONWARDS (Producer in brackets)

Key:

SWO: Sadler's Wells Opera Company at the London Coliseum

ENO: English National Opera Company at the London Coliseum

WNO: Welsh National Opera Company at the Dominion Theatre, London

GSMD: Guildhall School of Music and Drama, The Barbican, London

ROH: Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

GLYN: Glyndebourne semi-staged at the Royal Albert Hall, London

NOC: New Opera Company, Festival Hall, London

OA: Australian Opera at Sydney Opera House

THE ADVENTURES OF MR. BROUCEK (Janacek) ENO (1) (Colin Graham) 12/78 (2) David Pountney) 12/92

AIDA (Verdi) ENO, (Nicholas Hytner) 30/4/80

AKHNATEN (Glass) ENO, (David Freeman) 6/85

L'ALLEGRO, IL PENSEROSO, ED IL MODERATO (Handel) ENO 6/97

ANNA KARENINA (Hamilton) ENO, (Colin Graham) 5/81

ARABELLA (R. Strauss) ENO, (Jonathan Miller) 10/80

ARIADNE ON NAXOS (R. Strauss) ENO, (1) (Jeremy J. Taylor) 3/8 (2) (Graham Vick) 9/83 (3) GSMD 7/84

ARIODANTE (Handel) ENO, (David Alden) 4/93

THE BACCHAE (Buller) ENO, (Julia Hollander) 5/92

HE BARBER OF SEVILLE (Rossini) ENO, (Jonathan Miller) 11/87

THE BARTERED BRIDE (Smetena) (1) WNO (Rudolf Noelte) 4/82 (2) ENO, (Elijah Moshinsky) 4/85

BEATRICE AND BENEDICT (Berlioz) ENO, (Tim Albery) 1/90, OA (Elijah Moshinsky) 9/98

LA BELLE HELENE (Offenbach) ENO, (John Copley) 11/76

BILLY BUDD (Britten) ENO, (Tim Albery) 2/88

BLOND ECKBERT (Weir) ENO (Tim Hopkins) 4/94

LA BOHEME (Puccini) ENO (Steven Pimlott) 9/93

BOMARZO (Ginastera) ENO/NOC (Anthony Besch) 11/76

BORIS GODUNOV (Mussorgsky) ENO (Colin Graham) 2/83

LA CALISTO (Cavalli) (1) Opera Factory, QE Hall, (David Freeman) 9/89 (2) GSMD 11/96

LA CAMBIALE DI MATRIMONIO (Rossini) GSMD 2/81

EL CAMPIELLO (Wolf-Ferrari) GSMD (Tim Carroll) 3/96

THE CARMELITES (Poulenc) (1) GSMD 3/82 (2) ENO (Phyllida Lloyd) 5/99

CARMEN (Bizet) (1) ENO (David Pountney) 11/86 (2) ENO (Jonathan Miller) 9/95
CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA (Mascagni) ENO (Ian Judge) 10/86
CHRISTMAS EVE (Rimsky-Korsakov) ENO 12/88 (David Pountney)
CLARISSA (Holloway) ENO (David Pountney) 5/90
CORONATION OF POPPEA (Monteverdi) ENO (Colin Graham) 8/80
COSI FAN TUTTE (Mozart) (1) SWO (Glen Byam Shaw) 9/72 (2) GSMD 6/80 (3) ENO 5/94
COUNT ORY (Rossini) ENO (Anthony Besch) 3/85
THE CUNNING LITTLE VIXEN (Janacek) ENO (David Pountney) 6/88
THE CUNNING PEASANT (Dvorak) GSMD 3/97
IL CAMPIELLO (Wolf-Ferrari) GSMD 3/96
DALIBOR (Smetana) ENO (John Blatchley) 9/76
THE DAMNATION OF FAUST (Berlioz) (1) SWO (Michael Geliot), 71? (2) ENO (David Alden) 4/97
THE DEVILS OF LOUDUN (Penderecki) SWO (John Dexter) 11/73
THE DICTATOR (Krenek) GSMD 6/97
DIDO AND AENEAS (Purcell) ENO (Ian Watt-Smityh) 2/79
DOCTOR FAUST (Busoni) ENO (David Pountney) 10/90
DON CARLO (Verdi) (1) ENO (Colin Graham) 8/74 (2) ENO (David Pountney) 4/92
DON GIOVANNI (Mozart) (1) (Anthony Besch) 8/76 (2) ENO (Jonathan Miller) 12/85 (3) ENO (Guy Joosten) 3/95
DON PASQUALE (Donizetti) ENO (Patrick Mason) 2/93
DON QUIXOTE (Henze) GSMD 3/91
DON QUIXOTE (Massenet) ENO (Ian Judge) 10/94
DUKE BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE (Bartok) (1) SWO (Glen Byam Shaw) 3/72 (2) ENO (David Alden) 1/91
THE DUEL OF TANCREDI AND COLINDA (Monteverdi) ENO (David Alden) 3/93
L'ENFANT ET LES SORTILEGES (Ravel) GSMD 11/94
L'ETOILE (Chabrier) GSMD 7/86
EUGENE ONEGIN (Tchaikovsky) ENO (1) (Graham Vick) 4/89 (2) (Julia Hollander) 3/94 (3) GLYN (Graham Vick/Caroline Sherman) 8/94
EURYANTHE (Weber) ENO (John Blatchley) 11/97
THE FAIRY QUEEN (Purcell) ENO (David Pountney) 10/95
FALSTAFF (Verdi) (1) GSMD) 7/85 (2) ENO (David Pountney) 2/89
FAUST (Gounod) ENO (Ian Judge) 10/85
FENNIMORE AND GERDA (Delius) ENO (Julia Hollander) 11/90
FIDELIO (Beethoven) (1) ENO (Joachim Herz) 5/80 (2) ENO (Graham Vick) 4/96
LA FINTA GIARDINIERA (Mozart) (1) GSMD 3/94 (2) ROH 9/06 (Christof Loy)
DIE FLEDERMAUS (J. Strauss) (1) ENO (Richard Jones) 12/91 (2) GSMD 9/93

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN (Wagner) ENO (David Pountney) 2/82
THE FORCE OF DESTINY (Verdi) (1) ENO (David Rich) 3/78 (2) ENO
(Nicholas Hytner) 9/92
DIE FRAU OHNE SCHATTEN (R. Strauss) WNO (Gilbert Deflo) 3/81
FROM THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD (Janacek) (1) ENO (Colin Graham)
12/77 (2) WNO (David Pountney)
THE GAMBLER (Prokofiev) ENO (David Pountney) 4/83
GIANNI SCICCHI (Puccini) (1) ENO (Colin Graham) 2/78 (2) GSMD
11/85 (3) ENO Stephen Unwin 11/90
GLORIANA (Britten) ENO (Colin Graham) 8/72
LE GRAND MACABRE (Ligeti) ENO (Elijah Moshinsky) 12/82
HANSEL AND GRETEL (Humperdinck) ENO (David Pountney) 12/87
L'HEURE ESPAGNOLE (Ravel) GSMD 11/85
THE ICE BREAK (Tippett) ROH (Sam Wanamaker) 5/79
THE INQUEST OF LOVE (Harvey) ENO (David Pountney) 6/93
THE ITALIAN GIRL IN ALGIERS (Rossini) (1) SWO (Wendy Toy) 10/68
(2) ENO (Howard Davies) 1/97
JENUFA (Janacek) ENO (Lucy Bailey) 6/94
JULIETTA (Martinu) ENO/NOC (Anthony Besch) 4/78
JULIUS CAESAR (Handel) (John Copley) 12/79
KATYA KABANOVA (Janacek) SWO (John Blatchley) 9/73
KOVANSHCHINA (Musorgsky) ENO (Francesca Zambello) 11/94
KING ARTHUR (Purcell) GSMD (Francisco Negrin) 11/95
THE KING OF ATLANTIS (Ullman) GSMD 6/97
KING PRIAM (Tippett) ENO (Tom Cairns) 2/95
KING ROGER (Szymanowski) ENO/NOC (Anthony Besch) 3/76
KONIGSKINDER (Humperdinck) ENO (David Pountney) 1/92

THE LADY MACBETH OF MTSENSK (Shostokovitch) ENO (David Pountney)
5/87 (2) OA (Francesca Zambello) 6/02
LEAR (Reimann) ENO (Eike Gramss) 1/89
LIFE WITH AN IDIOT (Schnittke) ENO (Jonathan Moore) 4/95
LINDA DI CHAMOUNIX (Donizetti) GSMD (Stephen Metcalfe) 6/96
LOHENGRIN (Wagner) (1) SWO (Colin Graham) 8/71 (2) ENO (Tim
Albery) 11/93
LOUISE (Charpentier) ENO (Colin Graham) 10/81
THE LOVE OF THREE ORANGES (Prokofiev) ENO (Richard Jones) 12/89
LULU (Berg) GLYN (Graham Vick/Matthew Richardson) 8/96
MACBETH (Verdi) ENO (David Pountney) 4/90
MADAME BUTTERFLY (Puccini) (Graham Vick) 9/84
THE MAGIC FLUTE (Mozart) ENO (1) Anthony Besch) 1/75 (2)
(Jonathan Miller) 1/86 (3) (Nicholas Hytner) 3/88
THE MAKING OF THE REPRESENTATIVE FOR PLANET 8 (Glass) ENO
(Minoru Domberger/Harry Silverstein) 11/88
THE MAKROPULOS CASE (Janacek) (1) SWO (John Blatchley) 1/72 (2)
ENO (David Pountney) 8/82

LES MAMELLES DE TIRESIAS (Poulenc) ENO (John Copley) 2/79
MANON (Massenet) ENO (Colin Graham) 9/74
THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO (Mozart) (1) SWO (John Blatchley) 8/71
(2) ENO (Jonathan Miller) 11/78 (3) (Graham Vick) 10/91
MARY STUART (Donizetti) ENO (John Copley) 12/73
A MASKED BALL (Verdi) (1) SWO (Tom Hawkes) 11/73 (2) ENO (David
Alden) 11/91
MASKERADE (Nielsen) ROH (David Pountney) 9/05
THE MASK OF ORPHEUS (Birtwhistle) ENO (David Freeman) 5/86
THE MASTERSINGERS OF NUREMBERG (Wagner) (1) SWO (Byam Shaw/
Blatchley) ? 1968/9 Revived ENO 12/74 (2) ENO (Elijah Moshinsky)
2/84
MAVRA (Stravinsky) GSMD11/85
MAZEPPA (Tchaikovsky) ENO (David Alden) 12/84
THE MERRY WIDOW (Lehar) ENO (David Rich) 11/75
THE MIDSUMMER MARRIAGE (Tippett) ENO (David Pountney) 5/85
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (Britten) (1) ROH (Christopher
Renshaw) 6/86 (2) ENO (Robert Carsen) 5/95
THE MIKADO (Gilbert & Sullivan) ENO (Jonathan Millar) 9/86
MIREILLE (Gounod) ENO (Antoine Bourseiller) 12/83
MOSES (Rossini) ENO (Keith Warner) 12/86
L'OCCASIONE FA IL LADRO (Rossini) GSMD 11/94
OEDIPUS REX (Stravinsky) (1) SWO (Michael St. Denis) 3/72 (2) ENO
(David Alden) 1/91
ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE (Gluck) ENO (Martha Clarke) 3/97
ORPHEUS IN THE UNDERWORLD (Offenbach) ENO (David Pountney) 9/85,
(2) OA (Ignatius Jones) 3/03
OSUD (Janacek) ENO (Keith Hack) 9/84
OTELLO (Verdi) ENO (Jonathan Miller) 9/81
PACIFIC OVERTURES (Sondheim) ENO (Keith Warner) 9/87
PAGLIACCI (Leoncavallo) ENO (Ian Judge) 10/86
PARSIFAL (Wagner) ENO (Joachim Herz) 3/86
PATIENCE (Gilbert & Sullivan) ENO (John Cox) 11/84
THE PEARL FISHERS (Bizet) ENO (Philip Prowse) 9/87
PELLEAS AND MELISANDE (Debussy) ENO (1) (Harry Kupfer) 11/81 (2)
David Pountney 11/90
PETER GRIMES (Britten) ENO (Tim Albery) 4/91
THE PLUMBER'S GIFT (Blake) ENO (Richard Jones) 5/89

THE PRINCE OF HOMBURG (Henze) ENO (Nikolaus Lehnhoff) 6/96
PRINCESS IDA (Gilbert & Sullivan) ENO (Ken Russell) 11/92
THE QUEEN OF SPADES (Tchaikovsky) ENO (David Pountney) 1/83
THE RAKE'S PROGRESS (Stravinsky) ROH (Elijah Moshinsky) 6/79
THE RAPE OF LUCRETIA (Britten) (1) ENO (Graham Vick) 11/83 (2)
GSMD (Stephen Metcalfe) 3/95
THE RETURN OF ULYSSES (Monteverdi) ENO (David Freeman) 5/92

THE RHINEGOLD (Wagner) SWO (Glen Byam Shaw/John Blatchley) 3/72
RIENZI (Wagner) ENO (Nicholas Hyter) 9/83
RIGOLETTO (Verdi) ENO (1) (Michael Geliot) 1/78 (2) (Jonathan Miller) 8/82
THE RING OF THE NIBELUNG (Wagner) ENO (Glen Byam Shaw/John Blatchley) 2/76
THE RISE AND FALL OF THE CITY OF MAHAGONNY (Weill) ENO (Declan Donnellan) 6/95
THE RISING OF THE MOON (Maw) GSMD (Patrick Libby) 3/86
ROMEO AND JULIET (Gounod) ENO (Colin Graham) 1/81
DER ROSENKAVALIER (R. Strauss) ENO (1) (John Copley) 1/75 (2) (Jonathan Miller)
THE ROYAL HUNT OF THE SUN (Hamilton) ENO (Colin Graham) 2/77
RUSALKA (Dvorak) ENO (David Pountney) 3/83
SALOME (R. Strauss) ENO (1) (Joachim Hertz) 12/75 (2) David Leveaux) 5/96
LA SCALA DI SETA (Rossini) OA (Stuart Maunder) 7/03
SEMELE (Handel) Pinchgut Opera, Sydney (Justin Wey) 12/02
THE SERAGLIO (Mozart) ENO (John Copley) 10/75
THE SICILIAN VESPERS (Verdi) ENO (Fabrizio Melano 4/84
THE SIEGE OF CALAIS (Donizetti) GSMD (Stephen Medcalf) 3/93
SIEGFRIED (Wagner) SWO (Glen Byam Shaw/John Blatchley) 2/73
IL SIGNOR BRUSCHINO (Rossini) OA (Stuart Maunder) 7/03
DIE SOLDATEN (Zimmerman) ENO (David Freeman) 11/96
THE STONE GUEST (Dargomyzhsky) ENO (Keith Warner) 4/87
STREET SCENE (Weill) ENO (David Pountney) 2/92
THE TALES OF HOFFMAN (Offenbach) (1) ENO (Colin Graham) 10/77 (2) GSMD (Robert Chevara) 6/94
TEN BELLES WITHOUT A RING (Suppe) GSMD 2/81
THERESE (Tavener) ROH (David William) 10/79
TIMON OF ATHENS (Oliver) ENO (Graham Vick) 5/91
TOSCA (Puccini) (1) ENO (John Blatchley) 2/76 (2) ROH (Zeffirelli) 4/77 (3) ENO (Jonathan Miller) 1/87 (4) ENO (Keith Warner) 9/94
LA TRAVIATA (Verdi) ENO (1) (John Copley) 12/76 (2) (David Pountney) 9/88 (3) (Jonathan Miller) 9/96
TRISTAN AND ISOLDE (Wagner) ENO (1) (Glen Byam Shaw/John Blatchley) 8/81 (2) (Gotz Friedrich) 12/85
THE TROJANS IN CARTHAGE (Berlioz) ROH (Elijah Moshinsky) 10/77
IL TROVATORE (Verdi) ENO (John Copley) 1/77
THE TSAR HAS HIS PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN (Weil) GSMD 6/97
TURANDOT (Puccini) ENO (WNO) (Christopher Alen) 11/95
THE TURN OF THE SCREW (Britten) ENO (Jonathan Miller) 11/79
THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS (Wagner) SWO (Glen Byam Shaw/John Blatchley) 1/71
THE TWO WIDOWS (Smetana) ENO (David Pountney) 12/93

THE VALKYRIE (Wagner) (1) SWO (Glen Byam Shaw/John Blatchley)
1/70 (2) ENO (David Pountney) 10/83
WAR AND PEACE (Prokofiev) SWO (Colin Graham) 10/72
WERTHER (Massenet) ENO (1) (John Copley) 3/77 (2) (Keith Warner)
8/91
WOZZECK (Berg) ENO (David Pountney) 9/90

XERXES (Handel) ENO (Nicholas Hytner) 2/85

Annex B

OPERA VIDEO INVENTORY August 2007

Key:

C means Commercial Tape: CC copied from a commercial tape: D
means commercial DVD: UD means unauthorised copy DVD: Rest
copied on tape from TV:
?? means unattractive production.

**The Adventures of Mr. Broucek (Indiana-UD'82)
**L'Africaine(2) (San Fran-C 1988)
*Aida (San Fran 1983)+(Met 1989)
*Alceste (Paris 2000)
Alcina (Dortmund 2000)
***Andre Chenier (ROH) '84
Anna Bolena (Canada '84)
**Anthony and Cleopatra (Chicago-UD '91)
**Arabella (Glyn-C '84)
**Ariadne auf Naxos (Dresden '00)
Ariodante (Glyn'96)
*Aspern Papers (US-UD'88)
*Attila (Verona-UD'85)
Bank Ban (Hungarian Film '74)
**Barber of Seville (Scala'72)+(Glyn-C'81)+(ROH-UD'05??)
**Bartered Bride (ROH @ Sadler's '98)
**Belle Helene {Paris 2000)
Beggar Student (Hungarian Film-UD '80s)
Beggar's Opera (TV Film-D '83)
***Betrothal in a Monastery (Kirov'98)
*Billy Budd (Geneva-UD '94)
***Boheme (ROH-C)+Glyn Touring '00??)+ Genoa-CC '89)
**Boreades (Paris '03)
*Boris Godunov (Moscow '?) + (Kirov-C '90-2)
*Brigands (Lyons-UD '89 ??)
**Candide (Barbican-CC '89)+(Edinburgh-UD '88)+(Paris-UD'06)

**Capriccio (SanFran-D '93)
 *Carmelites (OA-CC'84 in English)+(FrenchTV 2000)
 **Carmen (Film)+ (ROH) + (ROH-UD '77) +(Verona "05)
 *Cavalleria Rusticana (Film-Scala '82)
 ***Cenerentola (Houston c.'96)+(Oz-CC)+(Salzburg '88) (ROH'00??)
 **Christmas Eve (Bloomington-UD '78)
 *Clemenza de Tito (Glyn '91)
 **Comte Ory (Glyn-C '97)
 **Coq d'Or (Glasgow-UD '80)
 *Coronation of Poppea (WNO' 98)
 Così fan Tutti (Film in English)+(Drottingholm 1984)+(Oz-CC'90)
 Crown Bride (Film/Sweden c.90s)
 +(Zurich '00)
 ***Cunning Little Vixen (ROH'81)+(Paris'95)
 Dalibor (Czech '97)
 *Damnation of Faust (Philadelphia-UD '85)
 Dangerous Liaisons (San Fran c.90s)
 **Dead City (Strasburg "00)
 Death of Klinghofer (Film '06)
 **Don Carlo (Paris Chatalet '98)
 ***Don Giovanni (ROH '88)+(Glyn-CC '77) + (Film)
 **Don Pasquale (Cagliari-D '02)
 Duenna (Barcelona-UD '92)
 ***Duke Blubeard's Castle (Film)
 Education Manquee (Paris-D '05)
 **Elisir D'Amore (Met '81)+(Lyon '96)
 **Ermione (Glyn 95)
 *Ernani (Scala 1983-C)
 ***Etoile (Lyons '86)
 ***Eugene Onegin (Glyn'94)+(Baden'98)+(Chicago-UD'85)
 **Falstaff (Glyn-C 76)+(Saltzburg'82)+(ROH'99)
 **Faust (WNO '96) + (ROH '04) + (USA/TV-UD '79)
 **Fanciulla del West (ROH-C '83)
 **Fedora (Scala-D '93)
 **Fiery Angel (Kirov)
 **Fidelio (Glyn-C '79)
 **Fledermaus (Vienna'87)+(OA '96)+(Glyn'03)+ (ROH-UD"77)
 *Flight (Glyn '99)
 **Flying Dutchman (ENO-UD)+(Bayreuth-D'85??)
 **Force of Destiny (Kirov '98)
 *Fra Diavolo (OA-UD '77)
 **Francesca da Rimini (Met-C'84)
 **Freischutz (Hamburg '99??)
 Ghosts of Versailles (Met-C '93)
 **Giaconda (Vienna-C'86)
 **Gianni Schicchi (Scala-C '83)+(Paris '03)+(Glyn '04)

* Goya (Washington-UD '86)
*Greek Passion (Film '99)
Halka (Polish Nat)
**Hamlet (Paris Chatelet 2000)
*Hansel and Gretel (WNO??) (Zurich'99)
Haydee, ou le Secret(Paris-D'03)
**Heure Espagnol (Paris'05)
**HMS Pinafore (OA '05)
**Huguenots (OA-CC)
Impresario (Schauspieldirektor) (BBC Film-UD'80)
**Idomeneo (Glyn-D '83)+(Scala'05??)
Intermezzo (Glyn-C '83)
*Iphigenia in Tauris (Zurich '01)
**Jenufa (Glyn '89)
*Juive (Vienna-D '03??)
**Katya Kabanova (Glyn'88)+(Salzburg??)
**Khovanshchina (Bolshoi'79)
*Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk (ENO '87)+(Russian Film'66)
Lakme (OA-CC'76 in French, no subs)
Little Women (Houston-UD '00)
*Livietta & Tracollo (Belgium'98)
*Lohengrin (Bayreuth '91)
***Love of Three Oranges (Glyn '82)+(Leeds-UD'89)
**Lucia di Lammermoor (Oz-CC) '86
**Luisa Fernanda (Madrid '95)
**Luisa Miller (Lyon-C'88)
*Lulu (Glyn '96)
**Macbeth (French Film)+(Glyn-CC '72)+(Zurich '01??)+(BBC-UD
'77)
***Madame Butterfly (OA)+(Film-CC)+(ROH '03)
**Magic Flute (Glyn-C '78)+(Bergman, Drottingholm)
Maid of Orleans (Canada-UD '74)
**Makroupos Case (Glyn '95)
Man in the Moon (TV Film-UD '06)
**Manon (Paris-D '01)
**Manon Lescaut (Glyn '97)+(Finland 2000??)
***Marriage of Figaro (Glyn)+(Met'99)+(BBC 2000)+(Lyon 1994)
**Masked Ball (Vienna)
**Mazeppa (Kirov-D'98)
***Meistersinger (2) (OA-C '88)
**Merry Widow (OA-C '88)+ (San Fran '02)
*Merry Wives of Windsor (English Film-UD '65)!
*Midsummer Marriage (C4-UD)
**Midsummer Night's Dream (Glyn-C'81)
Miserly Knight (Glyn'05)
*Mitridate (Vicenta '00)

***Mikado (ENO '87)
Mozart & Salieri (New York-UD 1983)
Mlada (Bolshoi'92)
*Nabucco (WNO??)+(Verona 1981-C)+(Verona 2000)
**Nina (Zurich "00)
*Nightingale (French film c.2005)
**Night in Venice (Burgundland '99)
***Oberon (Edinburgh '86)
**Oedipus Rex (Saito Kinen Festival-UD'93)
*Orfee et Euridice (OA'93)+(Chatelet,Paris 2000)
*Orfeo (Film)+(Barcelona '02)
Orpheus in the Underworld (Brussels-D '97??)
Otello (WNO '87)+(Film-CC'86)
Owen Wingrave (C4 2001)
***Pagliacci (Film Scala'82)+ (Washington-UD '98)
Palace (Savonlinna '95)
Paladins (Paris'00??)
Parsifal (2) (Bayreuth'99)
**Patience (OA-CC'95)
*Pelleas et Melisande (WNO'92)+(Glyn '99??)
**Perichole (Paris "00)
**Peter Grimes (BBC2)+(ENO-C'94)
**Pirates of Penzance (OA '06)
*Platee (Paris '02)
**Porgy and Bess (Glyn-C '93)
*Prince Igor (2) (ROH-C '90)
**Queen of Spades (Kirov-C'92)+(Met '99)
*Rake's Progress (Film)+(Glyn "89)
**Return Of Ulysses (Salzburg '85)
**Rheingold (Met-C '90)+(ROH '05??)
Riders to the Sea (Irish TV-UD* '88)
Rinaldo (Munich '01??)
***Ring Cycle (Bavarian State Opera 1990)
 [Rheingold ; Walkure ; Siegfried ; Gotterdammerungen]
**Rigoletto (Film-Vienna)+ ROH '01)
**Rise and Fall of Mahoganny (Salzburg '98)
*Rosenkavalier (ROH-C)+(Old Film/Vienna, no subs)+(Zurich '04??)
Rodelinda (Glyn'98)
*Romeo et Juliette (FrenchTV '02)
*Rondine (Canadian Film-UD '80)
** Revoltosa (Madrid)
*Rosa, the Horse Opera (Nederlands)
*Rusalka (ENO '86)
Ruslan and Ludmilla (Kirov)
Sadko (Kirov)
***Salome (ROH) '97)+(ROH-D'92)

Samson (French TV 99??)
 **Samson and Delilah (San Fran '81)
 **Semele (ENO '99)
 ***Seraglio (ROH-C '88)+(Saltz '97)+(TV Film 2000)
 Silver Tassie (ENO 99)
 **Simon Boccanegra (Met '84)
 **Simplicius (Zurich '99)
 ***Steffelio (ROH '93) + (Met-UD'93)
 **Suor Angelica (Scala-C '83)
 Streetcar named Desire (San Fran)
 Summer and Smoke (Chicago-UD '80)
 *Il Tabarro (Scala-83)
 ***Tales of Hoffman (ROH-C '97))+(Old British Film)
 Tannhauser (Munich '95??)
 Tender Land (USA-UD'79)
 Theodora (Glyn c. 2000)
 **Thieving Magpie (Cologne-C '87)
 Toreador, ou l'accord parfait (Paris-D'03)
 ***Tosca (Live-Rome)+(OA-CC'85)+(Met'85)+(Nederlands 2001??)
 ***Traviata (ROH '92)+(Film '84)+(C4 '2000)+(Venice'05)
 **Trial by Jury (OA '05)
 Tristan and Isolde (Munich '98??)
 *Trovatore (OA-CC'83)
 ** Troyens (2) (Met-C '84)+(Paris'03??)
 ***Turandot (ROH)+(San Fran'94)+(Beijing '99)+(Verona-UD'83)
 **Turk in Italy (Zurich-D '02) + (BBC Film '05)
 *Turn of the Screw (Scottish '94)
 *Valkyrie (ROH '05??)
 *Vampyr (BBC TV-D '92)
 *Vanessa (Spoleto-UD'79)
 **Vie Parisienne (Lyon-C '91)
 **Village Romeo and Juliet (Film'89)
 ***Voyage to Rheims (2) (Barcelona-D '03)
 **War and Peace (2) (Kirov-C '91)
 Werther (French film ?80s)+(Walnut Creek-UD)
 *William Tell (2) (Scala-D '04)
 *Wozzeck (ENO '91)) c.250+

Ballina NSW November 2007