

HARMONY

No 249

June 2015



THE
MUSIC CLUB
OF LONDON



HARMONY

Number 249: June 2015

CONTENTS

5	An Afternoon with Sir John	Malcolm Rivers
6	The Music Club of London Summer / Autumn Programme	Marjorie Wilkins
11	John Copley: The MCL Christmas Dinner Guest Speaker 2015	Rosemary Frischer
12	<i>Spring Awakening</i> : The Music Club of London's AGM presentation	Michael Bousfield
14	An evening of opera and song with Magdalen Ashman	Katie Barnes
16	<i>Rise and fall of the city of Mahagonny</i>	Hilary Reid Evans
18	<i>Król Roger</i>	Hilary Reid Evans
20	Music Club of London trip to Bratislava	Trip members
27	On being an opera director	David Edwards
28	<i>Parallel Lives</i> : Richard Strauss and Jean Sibelius	David Edwards
32	An interview with Sir John Tomlinson	Ben Lawrence

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Cover photo of Sir John Tomlinson by Richard Carter

MARIA RADNER AND OLEG BRYJAK

Michael Bousfield

Germanwings Flight 9525 tragically cut short the lives of two outstanding Wagnerian artists at the peak of their careers. The previous night Maria Radner and Oleg Bryjak had been Erda and Alberich respectively at Barcelona's Gran Teatre del Liceu in Robert Carsen's *Siegfried*. Returning home the following day they were among some 150 lives lost in the French Alps, including Maria's husband and infant son.

Born in Dusseldorf in 1981, Maria studied music there and won a scholarship to attend the Bayreuth festival in 2007. She was a regular performer on the concert platform singing works by Handel, Beethoven, Schumann and many others. In August 2009 she performed in a recital at Wahnfried with works by Schubert, Liszt, Brahms and Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*. That same year she sang the First Norn and Flosshilde under Sir Simon Rattle in *Götterdämmerung* at the 2009 Festival d'Aix-en-Provence and again at the Salzburger Osterfestspiele in 2010.

In 2010 she sang Erda for the first time in a concert version of *Rheingold* at the Leipzig opera: a role she performed regularly in a variety of locations for the remainder of her short life, including the Metropolitan Opera, New York and in autumn 2012 at the Royal Opera House under Sir Antonio Pappano, performances I had the pleasure of seeing.

Maria was due to make her Bayreuth debut this summer as Erda. Reviewers stated that she had the rare pitch of a true alto, having an impressive charisma and great musicality. Colleagues commented on the beautiful bronzed hue of her voice, full and round – and with the strength of her personality always shining through.

The bass-baritone Oleg Bryjak was born in Kazakhstan to Ukrainian parents in 1960. After winning second prize in a singing competition in 1991 he moved to Germany and in 1996 joined the ensemble of the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Dusseldorf where he remained until his untimely death. He appeared on opera stages all over the world with a repertoire of more than 30 operas, working with Daniel Barenboim, Sir Andrew Davis, Sir Simon Rattle and Donald Runnicles to name a few. He was primarily a Wagnerian: Telramund, Hans Sachs, Klingsor and especially Alberich. After his Chicago appearances in that role one critic described him as the leading Alberich of the day.

Bryjak's voice was described as superbly sonorous and mesmerising. In London we had the pleasure of hearing him in that role at the Royal Albert Hall Proms conducted by Sir Simon Rattle. Other major roles included Pizarro, Amonasro, Falstaff and Leporello. At the Royal Opera House Covent Garden he sang in *Katya Kabanova* in 2007. He sang all three Alberich roles at Bayreuth last year and was scheduled to return this summer.

A two minute silence was held outside the Gran Teatre Liceu in memory of both artists who are now silenced forever.



The Mastersingers and the Music Club of London
present

**TIME BECOMES SPACE:
*PARSIFAL Act 3***

featuring a Masterclass with
Britain's pre-eminent bass-baritone

SIR JOHN TOMLINSON

SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 5TH 2015
11am – 5.30pm

with Mastersingers' Young Artists
Mark Le Brocq James Platt Stuart Pendred
Eddie Wade Brian Smith Walters
& Donald Thomson

Kelvin Lim *piano*

11.00 Illustrated lecture by **David Edwards**

2.00 Masterclass with **Sir John Tomlinson**

St Botolph's without Bishopsgate Church Hall
Bishopsgate, London EC2M 3TL
📍 Liverpool St

PLEASE SEE ENCLOSED BOOKING FORM FOR TICKETS

AN AFTERNOON WITH SIR JOHN

5th September 2015

Malcolm Rivers

As part of our educational programme Mastersingers are delighted that once again our Patron Sir John Tomlinson has been able to dedicate two days in his hectic international schedule to coaching six young singers in music from Act III of *Parsifal*.

The first day (4th September) will be spent in private one-to-one sessions with the singers listed on the opposite page. On the second day Sir John will work with three of these in a public masterclass with Kelvin Lim accompanying. Sir John's track record in this Wagner opera (and of course many others) is unparalleled and he most generously wishes to pass on his knowledge and experience to the aspiring generation of Wagnerian voices.

This process of passing on a lifetime of inside information is always fascinating and illuminating to witness. This is partly because it can't be written down (so much depends on individual personalities and the unique sound of each person's voice) and partly because the process can only exist in a live context where a young singer has the courage to show what he or she can do and be ready for an honest but always constructive response from the mentor.

The ancient Greeks had a word for it: *pedagogy*. Meaning neither purely teaching nor general instruction, *pedagogy* implies the absorbing of knowledge through exposure to a master, as is frequently recounted by Plato. In an Eastern culture we might acknowledge this as "Zen in the Art of Singing."

It is surely a most appropriate coincidence that Sir John recently sang the title role in the British premiere of the oratorio *The Last Days of Socrates*. by Australian composer Brett Dean. In The Daily Telegraph Ivan Hewitt described Sir John's Socrates as "a mixture of modest wisdom, sarcasm and humour." It is these qualities, along with his stupendous voice, irresistible charm and lifelong dedication to his craft that make him one of the most remarkable artists of our time.

All of us with a love of classical music are privileged to be able to experience all this with Sir John Tomlinson, so please join us at St Botolph's for an afternoon of rare musical insights.

Sir John Thomlinson photographed by Richard Carter at the Mastersingers / Music Club of London *Gods and Heroes* weekend of concerts and masterclasses presented at All Saints Chapel, Eastbourne from 3rd to 5th May 2013.



Music Club of London Summer/Autumn Programme 2015

Monday 13th July at 2pm

GUYS AND DOLLS

Silk Street Theatre of Guildhall School of Music and Drama

Written in 1950 and sometimes called 'A musical fable of Broadway' *Guy's and Dolls* is unquestionably one of the major milestones of American musical theatre. *Guy's and Dolls* is an adaptation of Damon Runyon's short stories about the New York underworld, written in the 1920s and 30s. Songs include such standards as *If I Were a Bell, I've Never Been in Love Before, Luck Be a Lady, Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat* and many more. The music and lyrics are by Frank Loesser.

Tickets: £15 (£10 concessions)

Friday 23rd July at 7.30pm

MENDELSSOHN: A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Artists from Garsington Opera and the Royal Shakespeare Company

Queen Elizabeth Hall, South Bank



Mendelssohn's shimmeringly beautiful music brings fresh illumination to Shakespeare's brilliantly intertwined dream-world where lovers, fairies and rude mechanicals confuse and pursue one another in a wood near Athens. It is a richly illustrative and imaginative work, packed with musical effects to evoke the rustle of leaves in the breeze, the darting movements of Queen Mab and her fairy crew and the braying of an ass.

Tickets: £25

Music Club of London Summer/Autumn Programme 2015

Friday 21st August at 7.30pm

BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS BY CANDLELIGHT

St Martin's in the Field, Trafalgar Square



Specialising in historically accurate performance of Baroque Music, **The Feinstejn Ensemble** present a selection of Bach's Brandenburg concertos as well as much loved pieces by Handel, Vivaldi and Telemann.

Tickets: £25

Note: Please leave your cheque blank, stating an upper limit as there is the possibility of a reduction on this price

Tuesday 8th September at 7pm

JANACEK: *THE CUNNING LITTLE VIXEN*

Peacock Theatre, Portugal Street



The opera will be performed by the British Youth Opera. Described by its composer as "a merry thing with a sad ending" *The Cunning Little Vixen* is a comedy tinged with tragedy rather than a whimsical social satire. It is a profoundly poetic tale for which Janacek wrote some wonderful, life-enriching music that is magnificently orchestrated.

Tickets: £21

Music Club of London Summer/Autumn Programme 2015

Tuesday 22nd September at 7.15pm

ROYAL OPERA HOUSE LIVE: *ROMEO AND JULIET*

Cinema 1, Barbican, Silk Street



Photo: Johann Persson

Prokofiev composed this work for the Kirov Ballet in 1935 but the huge demands it placed on the dancers meant it wasn't performed until 1938. He wrote new sections for a 1940 production and it was then that the music really took off, eventually forming the basis of three popular suites.

Choreographed by Kenneth MacMillan, this groundbreaking ballet is performed by principals Sarah Lamb and Rupert Pennefather.

Tickets: £21

Wednesday 23rd September at 7.30pm

**MURRAY PERAHIA, PIANO
LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA: BERNARD HAITINK**

Barbican Hall, Silk Street

Purcell arr Stucky	Funeral Music for Queen Mary
Beethoven	Piano Concerto No 4
Brahms	Symphony No 1

Bernard Haitink and Murray Perahia make up a powerful musical partnership to take listeners on a journey of musical moods, starting with moving funeral music by Purcell recreated for a modern orchestra, continuing with Beethoven's sparkling concerto and concluding with Brahms' milestone First Symphony which was 20 years in the making.

Tickets: £32

Music Club of London Summer/Autumn Programme 2015

Sunday 27th September at 11.30am

PAVEL HASS QUARTET

Wigmore Hall, Wigmore Street

Schubert	String Quartet in A minor D804 <i>Rosamunde</i>
Beethoven	String Quartet in F minor Op.95 <i>Seriosa</i>



Following the success of its *Bohemia* series last season, the Pavel Haas Quartet returns to Wigmore Hall to perform the compelling coupling of two Viennese masterworks. Schubert's *Rosamunde* Quartet, written at a time of personal despair, reflects its composer's creative resilience against adversity, while Beethoven's *Seriosa* Quartet projects and ultimately transcends tragedy and despair.

Tickets: £13 (£11 concessions)

Music Club of London Summer/Autumn Programme 2015

Thursday 8th October at 1pm

**BBC RADIO 3 LUNCHTIME CONCERT
INGOLF WUNDER, PIANO**

LSO St Luke's Old Street
(5 minutes walk from Old Street tube station, exit 7)



- | | |
|--------|---|
| Bartok | Selections from <i>Fifteen Hungarian Peasant Songs</i> |
| Chopin | <i>Nocturne</i> in E-flat major Op 55 No 2
<i>Nocturne</i> in B major Op 62 No 1 |
| Liszt | <i>Mephisto Waltz No 1</i>
<i>Petrarch Sonnet No 104</i>
<i>Hexameron</i> |

Tickets: £12 (£10 concessions)

Sunday 2nd August at 10.50 for 11am

GUIDED WALK: ST JAMES'S

Meet at Charing Cross underground station by the ticket barrier.

Join qualified London City Guide **Ann Archbold** for a walk around this fascinating area of gentlemen's clubs and memorials to heroes and a (token) heroine.

Tickets: Members £8, Guests £10

Please indicate if you would like to have lunch afterwards.

Please apply stating full name, guest name(s), address, telephone number and email address, enclosing an SAE to Ann Archbold: 37E Greville Road, London NW6 5JB.

JOHN COPLEY CBE

Rosemary Frischer



Those of you who are Friends of Covent Garden will notice that there is an interview with John Copley in the latest ROH magazine. He has recently retired as Resident Opera Director at the ROH and is to be the guest of honour at our Christmas Dinner this year.

John first appeared at the ROH at the age of 15 as an actor. Following training at the Royal Ballet School he returned to the ROH to work in stage management, moving into directing in 1960. His productions there included: *Le nozze di Figaro* (which ran for 21 years), *Così fan tutte* (which ran for 24 years), *Don Giovanni*, *L'elisir d'amore*, *Alceste*, *Faust*, *Werther*, *Maria Stuarda*, *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Semele*.

At Covent Garden he has staged no fewer than 39 operas including 16 new productions and 3 galas and at the ENO he staged 13 new productions. He worked regularly with all the major American opera companies, including the Met, Chicago Lyric, Dallas and San Diego and was for many years a regular director with the Canadian Opera Company. In Australia he directed more than 25 productions. European productions included performances in Athens, Munich, Berlin, Geneva, Brussels, Amsterdam, Drottningholm, Stockholm and Gothenberg.

2015 is a very special year for him as he celebrates the 40th anniversary of his wonderful *La Bohème* with its final performances at the ROH in June. The sets are brilliant and I was told by the designer Julia Trevelyan Oman that she took five years to research the opera. John is a fantastic speaker and we look forward to meeting him.

Please make a note of the date of the MCL Christmas Dinner:

THURSDAY 10th DECEMBER

Full details in the next edition of Harmony

THE MASTERSINGERS COMPANY: *SPRING AWAKENING*

Dartmouth House: 25th March 2015

Michael Bousfield

Photography by Richard Carter

For several years members of the Music Club have benefited from our close association with the Mastersingers Company. The results of this association have included three visits to Aldeburgh, a further three to Presteigne, the *Britten, Verdi and Wagner* weekend with Sir John Tomlinson in Eastbourne two years ago as well as several events in London. On every such occasion we have been able to watch and hear rising young opera stars at varying stages in their development, many of whom are now embarking upon significant international careers.

The quality of these productions has always been superb. Full credit for this must go to Artistic Director of The Mastersingers Company, Malcolm Rivers, and its Performance Director, David Edwards who have consistently presented such outstanding events for us.

With that background I knew we would not be disappointed with their *Spring Awakening* presentation which was specially devised for The Music Club of London and, most definitely, we were not! This was our first event at the prestigious Mayfair headquarters of the English Speaking Union and we owe the ESU a big *thankyou!*



The event burst forth like the new born lambs and daffodils, with so much promise, with poetry readings linking the music from Milton, Shakespeare, WH Auden, Keats, and others. Sara Kestelman is an experienced and award winning actress, and the beautiful tone and feeling that she injected into her readings of the mood-evoking poetry brought a flow to the evening and greatly enhanced our enjoyment.

The programme featured a charming selection of musical items based on the theme of Spring. This included music by Brahms, Rachmaninov, Puccini, Saint-Saens, Offenbach and Massenet. 20th Century music was well represented with Richard Strauss, Stravinsky and Berg. The singers were very ably accompanied by our two pianists and Coady Green (left) and Richard Black (right).



In Philippa Boyle (soprano) Aurore Lacabe (mezzo-soprano) and Mario Sofroniou (tenor) we experienced three artists who were powerfully and dramatically passionate in their interpretation and clearly destined for outstanding international careers.



Philippa Boyle

Sara Kestelman

Aurore Lacabe

Mario Sofroniou

MAGDALEN ASHMAN AT ST JOHN'S, SMITH SQUARE

16th March 2015

Katie Barnes

Photography by Richard Carter

Magdalen Ashman is already known for her fine performances of Wagner's mezzo roles. Sympathetically accompanied by David Syrus, she set out her stall with works composed over three centuries in four different languages.

Her programme covered art songs ranging from a perfectly luscious "Sabbath Morning at Sea" from Elgar's *Sea Pictures*, through Roussel's delightful *Le Bachelier de Saltimbanque* and Massenet's lovely *Elégie* to a beautiful rendition of Brahms' *Botschaft*.

In her operatic items she was joined by Simon Thorpe, well remembered as Welsh National Opera's Kothner, who contributed an intensely dramatic *Nulla...Silenzio!* from *Il Tabarro* and the enchanting *Tanzlied* from *Die Tote Stadt*, beautifully turned although I felt that his voice was a little too weighty for this gossamar piece.

Her *Habanera* and *Seguidilla* from *Carmen*, provocative, sexy, witty and dangerous, made me wish that I could see her sing the role in the theatre, and it was good to hear two comparative rarities, Musetta's moving *É destin* from Leoncavallo's unjustly neglected *La Bohème* and a fine rendition of *Acerba Voluttà* from *Adriana Lecouvreur*. The latter is easy to overdo, but it is sung by a Princess, and Ashman gave it proper dignity amid the swirling passion of the music.



But the two Wagner pieces were, of course, the highlight of the evening. For *Wo in Bergen*, Ashman was joined by Thorpe as a determined but shifty Wotan who knew from the first that his wife had him on the run. Ashman, in tremendous voice, immensely dignified, wounded and angry, never let us forget that Fricka has right on her side and was careful not to let us see the goddess enjoying the experience of bringing her erring husband to heel. Between them, they conjured up such a powerful spell that I felt

absolutely cheated that they did not perform the whole of the scene. Waltraute's narrative wielded a different sort of power, with Ashman standing still, wide-eyed, gazing into a horror almost too great for the terrified Valkyrie to comprehend as she so eloquently described the terror that had gripped Valhalla. Throughout the programme I was impressed by her use of words in all four languages, but this aria was the finest example.

Countertenor Cenk Karaferya gave a bravura rendition of *Svegliatevi nel core* from *Giulio Cesare*. His tone was rather reedy for my taste, but his voice contrasted well with Ashman's mellow sound in the mournful *Son nata a lagrimar* from the same opera.

Between the vocal numbers, guest pianist Christopher White gave three virtuoso pieces, first *Ramble on Love*, Grainger's take on themes from *Der Rosenkavalier* – something of a rambling rose, I thought, as it was often hard to distinguish any trace of Strauss – then Lizst's *Sonetto di Petrarca* and Godowsky's *Symphonic Metamorphosis on Die Fledermaus*.

Having taken us through so many emotions, she sent us home with Stephen Sondheim's bluesy *The Girls of Summer* in our ears. I do hope that this concert will bring her the recognition she deserves.



Christopher White

Simon Thorpe

Magdalen Ashman

Cenk Karaferya

David Syrus

RISE AND FALL OF THE CITY OF MAHAGONNY

Bertolt Brecht (libretto) and Kurt Weill (music)

Royal Opera House 1st April 2015

Hilary Reid Evans

Photography by Clive Barda

Only on April Fool's Day could the Fates so intervene, blacking out Covent Garden because of an underground electrical cable fire. With a live broadcast to cinemas scheduled, the Opera House diverted its limited electricity supply to the auditorium, leaving the restaurants and bars inoperable and ticket holders hungry, thirsty and somewhat bad tempered. It may have been coincidental stage-management, but John Fulljames' production of 'Rise and Fall' could not have been more appropriate to the occasion.



Based on a 1927 Songspiel work, the Marxist Brecht wrote 'Rise and Fall' as a piece deliberately intended to annoy the 'bourgeois' opera audience of Weimar Germany. 'Rise and Fall' is a parable that deals with human failings – gluttony, greed, lust, avarice and sloth all feature. Based in Mahagonny, an invented city where the only crime is to have no money, the opera explores naked self-interest, exploitation and betrayal, along with many of the contradictions human nature entails.

Even the creation of the work is contradictory, Brecht having stated that 'opera is too laden with tradition to deliver shocks to the social order'. Yet the operatic form is precisely the one he chose to attempt just that, his protest against the 'state of freedom' the Nazi party was trying to develop, a satirical critique of bourgeois culture, wrapped around with a confusion of styles, designed to challenge, criticise and mock.

How far then does Fulljames' production meet this brief? Arguably, not aggressively enough. Somehow the punches are pulled, despite the window dressing of front of house staff in slogan-bearing t-shirts and the use of projected anti-capitalist slogans on to the stage curtain. How much more in keeping with Brecht's intent it might have been to have the staff insult the audience – yet how hard to carry this off without first 'educating' the individuals concerned. Rather than a

lower ticket price, an inflated one might have been apt – despite his principles, Brecht had no objection to a healthy revenue stream, especially if it was diverted into his own pockets.

The production is only mildly challenging, using industrial imagery to reflect modern issues – the use of containers evoking refugees and their smuggling, the search for a better life, consumerism and the ultimate human unachievability of a Utopia. No beauty or romance here, love denied because it has no financial value, the characters all two-dimensional representations of humanity's flaws. Only the final scene – Jimmy's execution – succeeds in engaging the emotions, provoking in this audience member feelings of embarrassment and shame.

Conductor Mark Wigglesworth conducted Kurt Weill's strangely beautiful score with aplomb, transitioning the Opera House orchestra from foxtrot to fugue with ease, the music reflecting the deliberately derivative nature of the work. Christine Rice as the prostitute Jenny made a fair approximation of sleazy sensuality, but somehow never quite convinced, despite some fine singing.



Anne Sofie von Otter as Leocadia Begbick (the Widow) suffered from resembling a cross between Cruella de Vil and Janet Street Porter, but sang convincingly if without the harshness and rasping quality one might expect from this character. Kurt Streit's voice disappointed as the lumberjack Jimmy McIntyre but his fine acting conveyed well the character's sense of disillusionment and search for redemption. Of the other characters, Willard White underperformed as Trinity Moses, his stagecraft failing to compensate for his loss of register while the six girls never succeeded in exuding the desperation and raw sexuality their roles demand.

Stumbling out of the theatre and into dark, wet and nearly deserted London streets seemed a fitting end to an evening that challenged and depressed.



***KRÓL ROGER* BY KAROL SZYMANOWSKI**

Royal Opera House: 9th May 2015

Hilary Reid Evans

Photography by Bill Cooper

A 12th Century tale of religious mysticism, sexual frustration and power politics, played out to semi-modernist music may not appeal to everyone. Certainly this seemed the case for the restless, nylon-jacketed, knuckle-cracking person in the seat next to me. These distractions aside, Kasper Holten's psycho-dramatic approach to Szymanowski's 1926 work proved engrossing and beautiful.

Roger is portrayed as a king torn between logic and emotion, the Shepherd as his Dionysian counterpart, his neglected wife Roxana as the catalyst for Roger's loss of political and emotional control and descent into chaos.



Following closely to many of the composer's original staging instructions, designer Steffen Aarving places a giant head centre stage, beautifully lit to reflect Roger's emotional and intellectual turmoil, with the head revolving in the second act to reveal a complex of stairways and a writhing mass of bodies. The action occurs inside Roger's head, the writhing bodies of his subconscious gradually breaking free of their confinement.

The plot is very loosely drawn from Euripides' *The Bacchae* and shows us a rigidly orthodox society confronted by a subversively seductive cult leader (the Shepherd) who preaches a creed of beauty and pleasure. Samir Pirgu's Shepherd combines physical beauty with a sensuous tenor voice, his white clothing and shining Indian-style jacket referencing his mystical appeal. Issues of mass hysteria and the dangers of charismatic leadership are reflected in scenes reminiscent of 1930s Germany, a book-burning to the forefront and indications of societal disintegration, as well as Roger's ever present mental turmoil.



Polish baritone Mariusz Kwiecien (who is highly experienced in the role) conveys the king's anguish in a forceful and focussed performance. Georgia Jarman as his wife Roxana appears to drift through the performance in a dream: sensuous, confused by her husband's lack of sexual activity and her own attraction to the Shepherd.



The beauty of Szmanowski's score surprised: elements of oriental mysticism, incantations and the use of chromatic scales amongst a wide range of styles and techniques, which add to a complex aural experience. Each of the lead roles has a particular melodic character, with, as another reviewer has said, the opera's dramatic content literally being heard through the music.

Antonio Pappano has clearly prepared well for this the first performance of the opera at Covent Garden. The pace remains taught and intense throughout, an ideal accompaniment to the drama unfolding on stage. As ever, the Royal Opera Chorus under the direction of Renato Balsadonna produce a sound of great beauty that displays their mastery of this complex score. Król Roger's layers of meaning and drama are so intertwined that the 90 minutes seem too short to grasp Kasper Holten has evidenced his mastery as a director and confounded his critics. Except perhaps my knuckle-cracking neighbour!



MUSIC CLUB OF LONDON TRIP TO BRATISLAVA

21st to 26th March 2015



St Martin's Cathedral. Coronation church of the kings of Hungary.

Stewart Rigby



Bratislava Castle, St Martin's Cathedral and the Danube

Stewart Rigby

Music Club of London trip to Bratislava



The Slovak National Theatre, where we saw Mozart's *Don Giovanni*

Stewart Rigby



St Michael's Gate. The only remaining medieval gate in the city walls.

Stewart Rigby

Music Club of London trip to Bratislava



The Primate's Palace. (18th Century residence of Hungarian archbishops) Stewart Rigby



Man at Work Stewart Rigby

Music Club of London trip to Bratislava



Cathedral of St John the Baptist, Trnava: the earliest Baroque cathedral in Slovakia, built in the 1630s and founded by Esterhazy family for the Jesuits. Trnava, is called “Slovakia’s Rome” after the large number of churches and religious houses raised after the Primate of Hungary moved his seat to this ancient town in the 16th century following the Ottoman conquest of Hungary.

Stewart Rigby



Cathedral of St Nicholas, Trnava

Stewart Rigby

Music Club of London trip to Bratislava



Interior of St John's Cathedral. The Counter-Reformation in its splendour. Stewart Rigby



Group Lunch

Sue Chinn

Music Club of London trip to Bratislava



Hummel Museum

Susanna van Langenberg



The New Opera House

Susanna van Langenberg

Music Club of London trip to Bratislava



The Old Opera House

Susanna van Langenberg



Pottery demonstration in Pezinok

Susanna van Langenberg

ON BEING AN OPERA DIRECTOR

A response to Barry Millington's speech to Music Club of London members
as reported in *Harmony* 248

David Edwards

What a relief to hear someone debunk the notion that interpretative artists should not get in the way of the music, but rather interpret it according to how they hear it. Directors are regularly vilified and excoriated for "imposing" their ideas on a piece. (German directors doing Wagner are the worst culprits, commonly perceived as attempting to absolve their guilt over Nazism). Whereas, for example, if Ian Bostridge and Daniel Barenboim do *Winterreise* and you happen not to like it – it's too fast, too slow, too feisty, too cynical, wrong voice even, whatever – then that's a different matter. They are still respected as artists, even if one disagrees with their interpretation.

Directors are commonly and wrongly perceived as megalomaniac egotists with only one agenda: staging their own neuroses. Yes, there are probably one or two like this (just as there are instrumentalists who wilfully ignore metronome and dynamic markings in the search for revelatory interpretation etc) but the majority are serious artists attempting to bring a piece of theatre to life and stimulate some meaning for, and response from, the audience.

Directors generally draw their reading of an opera from its text, its historical context and from the music (yes, we're musically sensitive too and some of us can even read the notes!). Very few of us wake up one day and think "How can I make nonsense of this masterpiece?" But *Regietheater* has long become a dirty word and directors are nowadays pilloried as a matter of course.

Personally, I'm not against bringing in directors with no operatic background to stage opera because occasionally (Andrei Tarkovsky with *Boris* and Bill Brydon with *Vixen* at the Royal Opera House, for example) given the right designers and a supportive production team the results can be wonderful. But directing opera requires specialist skills, just as directing films and plays does – and it's wrong to assume that the techniques can automatically transfer across genres without the necessary knowledge and experience. I, for example, wouldn't know where to start with shooting a film even though I can work very comfortably with actors. I would need specialist assistance from cameramen, editors etc. The same is true when it comes to understanding the singer's process and working with them to create an opera production. It's not quite like anything else, and it's stupid to pretend that it is.

Barry Millington is so clear that we can all have our likes and dislikes – and so we should. There's nothing worse than bland. Let's celebrate the diversity of artistic interpretation in this country but also not ignore the specialist skills that each art form requires in order to achieve its best.

David Edwards' Music Club of London productions "Spring Awakening" and "Parallel Lives" are reported on pages 12 and 28 of this magazine. See page 4 for details of his Music Club of London / Mastersingers production "Time becomes Space" on 5th September.

PARALLEL LIVES

Richard Strauss (1864 – 1949) and Jean Sibelius (1865 – 1957)

David Edwards



With no more than a few days notice to replace the indisposed speaker for the Music Club of London's AGM evening, David Edwards devised a presentation illustrated with slides, music and video extracts to celebrate the work of Rosemary Frischer, in David's words: "one of the Music Club's staunchest and most dedicated working members who, after organizing events for so many years is finally stepping down from her onerous duties." When David asked what topic she would like him to cover, Rosemary replied: "Wagner, Strauss or Sibelius". David continues: "Wagner and Strauss is a recognizable and much-examined pairing, but Sibelius? Including him was an intriguing idea." This essay consists of extracts from David Edwards' presentation to mark that occasion. Ed

I confess I was a little surprised to discover that Strauss and Sibelius were born within a year of one another, albeit a thousand miles apart. Both men lived to a ripe old age (Strauss 85 and Sibelius 91). Both men's careers spanned the late 19th and the first half of the 20th Century, and though neither was perhaps a musical revolutionary like their revered predecessor Wagner or some of their contemporaries such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky, both had major international careers and left a significant body of work as their legacy.

Although they have some things in common, they of course have many dissimilarities, not least the fact that Sibelius composed almost no opera, whereas Strauss made his fortune in the theatre. But what is fascinating are the moments when their lives coincide, though they seldom met and, as far as I can ascertain, they never corresponded.

Both composers were born into moderately affluent middle-class families. Sibelius was born in 1865 in a modest timber house in Hämeenlinna, 60 miles north of Helsinki and just six degrees south of the Arctic Circle. His father was a doctor and from an early age young Jean studied the violin. He learned to speak Finnish at school, and set his heart on becoming a professional virtuoso violinist. At the age of 20 he went to study law at the Imperial University in Helsinki but soon switched to music at the Music Institute there. He had to renounce his violin-playing ambitions and he devoted himself to composition studies that took him to Berlin and Vienna in the early 1890s. By the age of 27 he had written and performed *Kullervo*, a large-scale work for soprano, baritone, chorus and orchestra based on an episode in the Finnish national epic poem the *Kalevala*. This work, now rarely performed, brought Sibelius to the attention of the musical world in Helsinki and it established the young composer as one

of the leading figures in the movement towards Finnish independence from Tsarist Russia. His music, and its subject matter, was clearly the music of Finnish nationalism and this is a theme that would recur throughout Sibelius' output for the next three decades. His *Karelia Suite*, composed in 1893 displays a fervent nationalistic spirit but also masterful orchestration – quite remarkable for a composer who was just 29 years old. Or was it?

Let's take a look at Richard Strauss' early career, up until a similar date. Strauss was born in 1864 in Munich where the young King Ludwig II had recently succeeded to the throne of Bavaria. Unlike Helsinki (which didn't even have an opera house at this time) Munich was an active melting-pot for the arts, and especially for opera. Hans von Bülow was Kapellmeister at the Court Opera and Richard Wagner was installed at the King's right-hand as the leading composer of the day. Wagner was having a wild affair with von Bülow's wife Cosima at the time, and Munich was a hotbed of gossip, rival factions and political ferment at the condition of the King's court.

Strauss' father Franz was the leading horn player in the Hofkapelle band and was going to make sure that his son had a sound musical education. Richard began piano lessons at four, violin lessons at seven and composition classes at ten. He was clearly bursting with musical talent. He devoured the works of Mozart in his youth, playing the piano concerti, studying the symphonies and listening to *The Magic Flute* at the Court Opera. At the age of 19 he went north to experience the musical life of Leipzig, Dresden and Berlin and by 21 he was Music Director of the orchestra in Meiningen. But it was in Weimar between 1889 and 1894 that Strauss established himself as a dynamic and fiery young composer.

As with Sibelius, Strauss was capable of brilliantly crafted orchestration and the use of musical colours. But there's no way that Strauss' music could be described as nationalistic, in the way that Sibelius' is. Strauss was writing programme music but was not concerned with making any political or nationalistic point, in the way that Sibelius was.

Now what about the third composer in this triangle: Wagner? Wagner was in his fifties by the time Strauss and Sibelius were born, so he was a whole generation older than them. As they were growing up, Wagner was building his Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, completing the *Ring* and composing his last opera, *Parsifal*. Richard Strauss' father played first horn at the premiere of *Parsifal* in 1882, and young Richard was there to listen. Sibelius first heard *Tristan* in Vienna in 1891, and by the time he attended the Bayreuth Festival in 1894 Strauss was conducting *Tannhäuser* there. Sibelius also saw a performance of *Lohengrin* at Bayreuth but it was *Parsifal* – which he attended twice – that gripped him most: “Nothing in the world has made so overwhelming an impression on me. All my innermost heart strings throbbed. I cannot tell you how *Parsifal* transported me. Everything I do seems so cold and feeble by its side.”

Sibelius abandoned his own attempt at an opera called *The Building of the Boat* because he felt overshadowed by Wagner. He completed a short one-act opera *The Maiden in the Tower* in 1896 for a charity event, but apart from some incidental music for the theatre, this was his only stage work. Like many other people, Sibelius' reaction to Wagner's music changed in later years and he came to view the music as “gross, brutal, vulgar and totally lacking in finer feelings”.

Although Sibelius was already finding his own personal voice by the time he went to Bayreuth, I think there is still some lingering influence of Wagner's use of orchestral colour and instrumentation in his later works, particularly the tone poems depicting nature and the wide Finnish landscape. Like all great artists, Sibelius was able to absorb an influence from outside and transform it into something uniquely his own.

Sibelius' need for nature and tranquillity bring Benjamin Britten to mind: another composer who sought and needed the sea and the empty sky to find inspiration for his music. Britten was not a fan of Sibelius' music, however. Occasionally he used to read the Symphonies in bed at night, to check that his aversion to the music was correct. Britten said that Sibelius "probably wrote when he was drunk".

Now this opinion does have some basis in fact. Like many Finns, Sibelius had an iron constitution and was a heavy drinker. A painting by his friend Akseli Gallen-Kallela called *Symposium* shows Sibelius with the artist and two fellow musicians, composer Oscar Merikanto and conductor Robert Kajanus, at what is clearly quite a heavy late-night drinking session. Merikanto has passed out on the table while the other two musicians stare glassy-eyed at a mysterious figure – possibly a Sphinx. All four men met regularly to ponder the fate of Finland and how their contribution could assist in the nationalist struggle for freedom from Russia.

But alcohol was to become an essential part of Sibelius' lifestyle, particularly in later years, and part of that dark Finnish personality. In 1927, at the age of 61 he wrote: "Isolation and loneliness are driving me to despair In order to survive I have to have alcohol. I am abused, alone and all my real friends are dead. Impossible to work. If only there was a way out."

By this stage in his life, Finnish independence had been won and Sibelius had virtually stopped writing music. In contrast to Richard Strauss who was composing right up to his death in 1949, Sibelius wrote nothing for the last 30 years of his life and destroyed many of his manuscripts, including considerable sketches for his Eighth Symphony.

Strauss became wealthy after the success-scandal of his opera *Salome* in 1905. He was continuously engaged as a conductor in Berlin, Vienna and all over Europe and it amazes me that, given his workload as a conductor, he found the time for writing music as well

Both Strauss and Sibelius established themselves in the first decade of the 20th Century as busy and popular composers and conductors. They both travelled extensively, Strauss mainly in Europe and Sibelius mainly in the UK and America. Sibelius lived in London for a while during 1909 and it was around this time that both men were dipping their toes into the waters of atonality that were washing around the European musical scene. Strauss had already begun to abandon key signatures in parts of *Salome* in 1905 and he continued to push the boundaries with his next opera, *Elektra* in 1909.

Neither Strauss nor Sibelius ever became converts to Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique nor did they subscribe to the activities of the Second Viennese School, but they studied these other composers and their own music was not unaffected by what they heard. Sibelius wrote an extraordinary, short piece called *Luonnotar* in 1913 a tone poem for soprano and orchestra. Employing dissonance and unusual orchestral effects, *Luonnotar* takes its text from the

Finnish epic *The Kalevala*. It was premiered by Aino Acté who had created the role of Salome in Strauss' opera in 1905. Acté was frequently asked to sing the final scene of *Salome* in concert and she asked Sibelius for a companion piece to the Strauss. He wrote *Luonnotar* especially for her.

So the parallels between Strauss and Sibelius continued into the 20th Century. Strauss conducted the premiere of the revised version of Sibelius' Violin Concerto in Berlin in 1905, though the composer wasn't present. Sibelius wrote incidental music for Hugo von Hoffmanstahl's play *Jedermann* in 1916, at the same time as the author and Strauss were writing *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.

I can't find any documentary evidence of a meeting between the two men. Strauss' comment will have to suffice: "*I have more skill, but he is greater*". Sibelius summed up his approach to composition with these words: "*I'm not suited for 'writing' music. All music has to be experienced.*"

There has been much speculation as to why Sibelius wrote almost nothing for the last thirty years of his life. He was intensely self-critical and became dissatisfied with his work and some maintain he was in the grip of alcoholism. But perhaps it was something to do with the fact that after Finland won its independence in 1917 the voice of nationalistic music was less important.

Strauss of continued writing into old age. Both he and Sibelius were tainted with Nazi associations during the Second World War, though Strauss tried to take refuge in Garmisch from the horrors in Germany. Finland allied itself with Germany in 1941, principally to oppose Russia, and Sibelius clearly supported the regime of the Third Reich.

There is an extraordinary 1961 photograph of Igor Stravinsky laying flowers at Sibelius' grave: a remarkable tribute from one great 20th Century's musical iconoclasts to another. Much as one may love Strauss, one cannot speak of his musical achievements in the same way as those of Stravinsky and Sibelius. This summer's feast of Sibelius at the BBC Proms will give us a rare chance to assess the composer's oeuvre in depth. Perhaps the silence of his final years was more to do with the fact that he had nothing more to say in music: a shrewd judgement on Sibelius' part which should earn him our reverence and respect.



AN INTERVIEW WITH SIR JOHN TOMLINSON

Ben Lawrence, *Daily Telegraph*, 12th February 2015

If anyone in the arts has suffered from being pigeonholed it's Sir John Tomlinson. "People want me to do Verdi's Falstaff because of the way I look," sighs one of the world's greatest opera basses. "But it's too baritone, my voice is too dramatic."

You can see why people would make these assumptions. Tomlinson looks like a good roisterer, the thinking man's Brian Blessed with a decent mane of hair, thick beard and an earthy, weather-beaten voice that could either work as a call to arms or as a persuasive summons to the nearest pub.

Yet appearances can be deceptive. Tomlinson is a thoughtful individual, intellectually rigorous and able to talk about his rather baroque profession with a seasoned cogency. And although his vocal register is as deep and dark as the night, there's a visceral thrill and an emotional susceptibility more associated with a higher-pitched Verdi hero.

"This morning [the actor] Jack Shepherd told me, 'I heard your King Marke on the radio and it was so unbearably emotional.' I think he meant that as a compliment. I believe it's all tied up with vulnerability – the reason I went into bass baritone is that the roles are fuller and more human. Wotan is the greatest part ever written for anybody – the full spectrum of emotions are there, and I revel in that. I hated the stand-and-sing bass roles like Ramfis in *Aida*. You know the priest..." At that point I am treated to a rapid but sonorous burst of Verdi before Tomlinson makes an effortless switch back to natural speech. "Even Sarastro, who sings beautiful arias, is totally two dimensional and never develops in any way. Of course, there is a pleasure in being stentorian but those bass parts do have their limitations."

Luckily, Tomlinson's voice was strong enough and supple enough to sustain those more cerebral bass-baritone parts, and he remains one of the greatest living Wagnerians. While he realises that those roles he has performed many times – Wotan, the Wanderer, Titirel, Gurnemanz – have served him well, there is apparently a desire to try new things which, at the age of 68, is paying dividends. In 2017 he will appear in Thomas Adès's *The Exterminating Angel* (based on Luis Buñuel's deeply weird surrealist film) at the Royal Opera House and in Brett Dean's version of *Hamlet* at Glyndebourne.

In February at the Barbican he appeared in another work by Dean, *The Last Days of Socrates*. It's a beautiful, touching, very human piece which shows the trial of the Greek philosopher, accused of corrupting local youths with his moral teachings and rejection of polytheism. If anyone is able to convey the uncompromising wisdom of an elder statesman it's Tomlinson. He reads me some of Graeme William Ellis's muscular libretto: "I believe the white swans that belong to Apollo have prophetic powers and sing at the moment of death... No bird sings in distress nor do I believe that the nightingale laments. Therefore I do not regard my end as misfortune."

Suddenly, through the subtle inflections in his voice, Tomlinson is able to take you somewhere far away from the Covent Garden Hotel on an overcast Monday afternoon in February. Yet he is not trying to be some silver-haired magus – Tomlinson has his feet rooted very firmly in reality. He grew up in a Methodist community in Oswaldtwistle, Lancashire, and although music was important in his family (his uncle conducted a male-voice choir in Accrington, his brother was always at the piano playing Bach fugues), he describes his background as essentially working class. "It was very black and grim and everyone went to the factories, but there was also a wonderful humanity. There were seven Methodist churches

built opposite each other. On the main road you had the primitives opposite the unionists and so on and so forth. With that background you are never above yourself; there is a humility which is absolutely ingrained. You're never going to be an operatic show-off diva."

Indeed, it is hard to imagine Tomlinson tolerating any hissy fits. I read once that he hated "the bull— of opera", and when I ask him what he meant he looks reluctant to clarify his remark. "Well, I always have a wonderful time when I'm doing the Germanic repertoire," he begins carefully. "There's a workmanlike practicality and dedication in people who sing Wagner. If I go to sing Ramfis in *Aida* – I won't give the name of a house – there is often a lot of primadonna behaviour going on, both with the cast and the director. It is a bit tiresome and people are not dedicated to the work, they are dedicated to themselves. It's a big ego trip. "Of course, it's nonsense to say that *Aida* is like this and *Die Walküre* is like that. What interests me is working with good singers and directors, and if I spend a month with egotistic narcissists it drives me crazy."

Tomlinson also believes that there are two different audiences in opera. He has recently performed in Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and found the sort of audience he loved – "aware, lively, theatrical". But there is also what he describes as "the canary-fancying audience".

"If you do [Bellini's] *La sonnambula*, the audience will be rich and it will be an irrational entertainment – these are generalisations of course – but on the whole, it won't mean much to them. They'll have dinner afterwards and opera becomes what it used to be in Handel's time – just some nice music going on in the background."

For all his essential Englishness and earthiness, Tomlinson is in many ways an opera radical. He praises the constant display of artistic innovation and is irritated by the attitudes of some auteurs who are parachuted in from outside the industry. "It annoyed me when Terry Gilliam came [and directed *Benvenuto Cellini* at the ENO and said that the dowdy old opera world needed people like him to liven it up. He is very talented, but he shouldn't insult opera because it has been at the forefront of adventurous theatrical work for decades. Indeed some people complain that it is too adventurous..."

Though not afraid to give his opinions, there is a wariness to Tomlinson which I sense stems from the British media's anti-elitist agenda. "We're very mixed up about opera," he says, and there is a quiet exasperation in his voice. He believes that most people would love *Peter Grimes* or *La bohème*. "I believe unequivocally that opera should be for everybody, but how do you get that message across? If Sir" – he emphasises that word with mock disdain – "John Tomlinson says opera is for everybody it looks absolutely awful... It is very hard to be a good advocate for the art form because the media always twists it." Shame on us all. Tomlinson is a wonderfully unambiguous voice for the universal appeal of opera. We should give this Socrates a fair hearing.

This image of Sir John Tomlinson (used on the front cover) was photographed by Richard Carter at the Royal Academy of Music on 30th November 2014 on the occasion of the Wagner Society Singing Competition and Carole Rees Awards presentations.



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IN THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE OF *HARMONY*

Hilary Reid Evans applies her pithy wit and analysis to some of the summer's operatic highlights, including:

Samson and Delilah at Grange Opera
Guilliamo Tell at Covent Garden
Salieri at Bampton Classical Opera
Saul at Glyndebourne
Intermezzo at Garsington
Poliuto at Glyndebourne.

Katie Barnes joins those sharing their verdicts on Robert Mansell's 5th June production of his play *Cosima* for The Music Club of London.

We welcome reports (however short!) from readers about any aspect of their music experiences during the summer. Copy deadline for the September issue: 10th August.

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A RICHARD STRAUSS TREAT IN DRESDEN

20th to 25th October 2015

This year the Semperoper and the Staatskapelle Dresden celebrate the close association of the composer with the city by presenting *Richard Strauss Days at the Semperoper* and this trip provides access to some of the best musical events which are on offer.

Christian Thieleman conducts *Alpine Symphony* in the centenary year of its composition. He will also conduct a performance of *Arabella* with a cast which includes Anne Schwanewilms as Arabella with Genie Kühmeier, Bo Skovhus, Kurt Rydl, Benjamin Bernheim and Janina Baechle.

Axel Kober will conduct Barbara Fry's production of *Elektra* with Irène Theorin as Elektra, plus Camilla Nylund, Waltraud Meier and Markus Marquardt. Soile Isokoski will give a Lieder recital with Ilkka Pananen at the piano.

Schedule

Tue 20 th	Check-in at London Heathrow for a flight to Berlin. Bed and breakfast accommodation in a superior 4 star hotel in Dresden
Wed 21 st	Tour of Dresden with an English speaking guide followed by lunch at a local restaurant. Evening: performance of <i>Alpine Symphony</i> at the Semperoper.
Thur 22 nd	Free day. Evening: performance of <i>Elektra</i> at the Semperoper.
Fri 23 rd	Guided excursion to Pilnitz. Walking tour of Pilnitz Park and Garden to include Pilnitz Palace, the Museum of Decorative Art and the Palace Museum. Return to Dresden by river boat with a lunch on board.
Sat 24 th	Free day. Evening: performance of <i>Arabella</i> .
Sun 25 th	Lieder recital in the morning followed by lunch at a local restaurant. Coach transfer to Berlin airport for our return flight to London Heathrow.

All-inclusive cost

£1020 per person sharing a twin bedded or double bedded room.

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