

# DIARY OF AN INVETERATE OPERA-GOER: SUMMER 2017

This summer wasn't any friend of mine.  
It might as well rain until September\*

Hilary Reid Evans

**Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> May.** To Glyndebourne to see *Hipermestra* (Cavalli). A cold start to the season and despite the cast's best efforts this somewhat racist production failed to produce any heat. Why? In an attempt to give the opera contemporary relevance, the director (Graham Vick) and designer (Trevor Nunn) gave us a modernist setting, all Arab 'bling' for the wedding scene and with more than a passing reference to ISIL and the destructive nature of Middle-Eastern politics in the following two acts. Mark Wilde as a pantomime dame version of Bernice initially amused, but the malevolent nature of the character was at odds with 'her' on-stage antics. Only the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment under the baton of Kati Debretzeni engaged the emotions. Rating – 4/10

**Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> June.** *Tristan und Isolde* (Wagner), Longborough. Such joy, director Carmen Jakobi had ditched the irritating dancers for this revival and, for one purist (me), the production was much improved as a result. Anthony Negus again brought his magic touch to the orchestra, drawing out the sonority of the score, as ever an example to all of what and how Wagner should be interpreted. Lee Bisset as Isolde was world-class, her acting as well as her voice spell-binding. Peter Wedd was a believable Tristan and Stuart Pendred shone as his friend Kurwenal. Had it not been for the weather this would have been a 10. Rating - 9/10

**Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> June.** Garsington and *Semele* (Handel). Warm enough to sip some champagne whilst crowd watching ahead of the performance so perhaps the alcohol shaped my view of this feel-good production. Director Annilese Miskimmon and designer Nicky Shaw gave us a frou-frou of a wedding scene to start and lots of interesting characterisations – a fertile and ever-pregnant Juno (Christine Rice), a strutting shape-shifting Jupiter (Robert Murray) and a flippertygibet Semele (Heidi Stober). To be honest it was a bit of a relief from all the jollity when Semele finally met her fate. Congreve's witty score and conductor Jonathan Cohen's inspired conducting made this a light-hearted evening. Rating – 8/10

**Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> June.** Glyndebourne and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, via Brett Dean's score. Hands up those of you who really love atonal and dissonant music? I thought so, only a couple of professional musicians who enjoy the intellectual challenge. But I bet not even you would not choose to listen to this score for fun and enjoyment. Just as well then that Matthew Jocelyn's libretto, set designer Ralph Myers Gustavian scene-setting and the fabulous acting of Allan Clayton (Hamlet) and the rest of the cast, including the doughty Sarah Connolly (Gertrude) rescued this production from my personal slough of despond over the direction modern opera seems to have taken. Even a glass of champagne and a glimpse of weak sun could only raise this to a rating of 6/10.

**Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> June.** *La Rondine* (Puccini), Holland Park Opera. Another cool evening. Perhaps it was the almost autumnal chill that left me cold or perhaps it was this miscast production. Elizabeth Llewellyn as the flirtatious Magda, one of opera's 'tart with a heart' roles, sounded magnificent, but her acting skills were sadly lacking. The chemistry between her and young lover Ruggero rated at about zero on my newly-invented Special Romantic Scale. Not even some clever sets and wonderful 1950s-style costumes (thank you, designer takis) could lift this beyond the mediocre. Puccini was aiming for a light-hearted operetta style, and was paid a substantial sum for this work, yet it has only one ear-worm worthy tune. He himself said *La Rondine* was 'limpid, easy to sing and with a little waltz music'. That about sums it up. Rating - 5/10

**Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> June.** *Die Walküre* (Wagner), Grange Park Opera, West Horsley Place. It all started so well. We bumped in to old friends, he in appropriate Tracht jacket. The weather was almost benign. The stage set (Jamie Vartan) reminiscent of the pre-restoration Haus Wahnfried. I have said it before, but somehow Stephen Barlow's Wagnerian conducting renders those precious scores almost unrecognisable. It takes a rare talent to make *Die Walküre* boring but this production succeeded, with not even Jane Dutton's brave interpretation of Brünnhilde able to rescue the evening. I wish Grange Park well in its new location, but will avoid any Barlow-conducted Wagner for the foreseeable future. Rating – 3/10

**Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> July** *Orfeo et Euridice* (Gluck), Longborough. Shivering winds pre-production and pouring rain as an accompaniment to the third act did not produce feelings of joy and wellbeing. Nor did this classically inspired production, which did little to provide a structure sufficient to support the team of enthusiastic Young Artists. Perhaps also it was because this was the first night but nothing seemed to 'gel'. The strange stylised hand gestures of the chorus, the wobbly human boat that ended Act II, the ugly olive headdress adorning the brow of Orpheo (Hanna-Liisa Kirchin). Even Kirchin's voice did not seem on form (although friends who attended on subsequent nights assured me this must have been due to first night nerves). Only conductor Jeremy Silver's interpretation of the score saved the evening. Sadly, damply, the rating for this can only be 4/10.

**Friday 11<sup>th</sup> August.** *La Clemenza di Tito* (Mozart), Glyndebourne. At last, a glimpse of sun. However not even a touch of warmth could breathe life in to this confusing production. The question why loomed large. Why did the boys in the video footage seem to be of about the same age, whilst the Tito and Sesto we saw on stage were a middle-aged man and apparently a teenager? Why was Rome portrayed as a reed marsh with a modern office block built above it? Why did Vitellia smoke so badly? Why was the production in drab modern costume? The most enjoyable exchange of the evening was not even on stage. Picture the scene in the Ladies' loo. Young Lady One: 'Would you have let them off with it?' Young Lady Two, drying her hands, 'Definitely not, left alive they become a locus for dissent and their own lives and reputations ruined. Best to execute them.' Move over Teresa May, a stronger and more aggressive rival has arisen. Rating (for the production not the conversation in the loo) - 6/10.

Ah well, I suppose there is always next year to look forward to. Pass me my umbrella please .....

\*With thanks to Carole King.