

Foreword

My enchantment with opera began, I think, in a shoe-box. Perhaps I was seven or eight at the time. I had been given, probably by an uncle who had sung many Gilbert & Sullivan roles, cut-outs of characters from *The Mikado*. They were exotic enough to please me, and it was suggested I should make a peep-show for their display. A shoe-box was commandeered and the characters were given places inside. I had no idea of the story, so my show was more like an unorganised final curtain. A hole was made in the front of the box through which admiring spectators might peep; and in the top of the box a torch was fixed to light my arrangement. Grown-ups expressed inevitable astonishment and delight. I purred, and put my foot on the first rung of an artistic ladder.

As a teenager during the Second World War, I saw only one opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*. It made little impression, seeming frivolous to one taken up with Bach, Beethoven and Brahms at the time. The blackout was somehow not conducive to opera, and my musical instruction was distinctly Toveyesque, so that I was enthralled by the mysteries of sonata form rather than the significance of a cabaletta or the coloratura that might embellish it. Indeed wartime austerity could only keep me from an artistic experience my mentors may have considered dubious if not risky. So the nearest I got to both *Aida* and *La bohème* were the capacious 78 rpm record albums that once held them both but were then home to sterner stuff. By now I was cellist enough for weekly quartets and a modest place in symphonic works.

Opera, however, came into my life from a quarter shrouded in mystery. The wartime activities at Bletchley Park are now public knowledge. Then they were not, but it became obvious the staff contained a number of very gifted musicians. Notable among their achievements was the formation of a viable opera group that would perform in concert at certain selected locations under the baton of the linguist, Ludovick Stewart. Mozart was the staple fare, and that was certainly how I first heard *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute*. I preferred the former, approving in the latter only the fugal overture and duet of *The Men in Armour*. With increasing cellistic skill, I was allowed to participate in the Bletchley concerts so that I got inside knowledge of the works.

During my schooldays I started writing reviews of musical events for the weekly magazine; towards the end I heard *Peter Grimes* at Sadler's Wells and *The Rape of Lucretia* at Glyndebourne, which makes me regret the more that I have had the chance to write about only one Britten opera since. Equally crucial was my National Service in Egypt, not so much for the lingering presence of a German prisoner-of-war orchestra in the Canal Zone, though it did extend my symphonic repertoire to include Bruckner, but for the revelation of Wagner. I remember no Wagner during my school years, unless it was the *Lohengrin* wedding music in church, which was obviously so much less exciting than the Mendelssohn march. But now I rehearsed 'The Ride of the Valkyries' as courtesy cellist in the band of the North Staffordshire Regiment; could hear at the local Education Centre run by John Warrack the preludes to *Tristan* and *Meistersinger* Act 3 in close succession, not sure when one ended or the other began; and above all I could borrow for my own delectation and instruction records of the 1928 Bayreuth *Tristan* conducted by Elmendorff, with Larsén-Todsen as Isolde and Gunnar Graarud's *Tristan*.

Returned to England and at Cambridge in nick of time to begin the 1948 academic year, I continued to cherish Wagner so that, though reading Classics and Egyptology, I earned marks from Paddy Hadley as professor of music by identifying the *Tristan* chords he played to a group of us as from *Meistersinger* Act 3. When in emotional turmoil, it was *Meistersinger* I would always pound on the piano. My operatic activities extended backwards towards the beginning when Jill Vlasto enlisted me as cellist for her productions at Girton of Cavalieri's *Rappresentazione di Anima e Corpo* and the *Orfeo* of Monteverdi. Standard fare was provided by visits of the Chelsea Opera Group, which I later joined as 'the discreetest cellist west of Notting Hill Gate', according to Colin Davis. These were also the years when operatic tradition seemed worthily maintained in England by both Vaughan Williams in *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Walton's *Troilus and Cressida* apart from Britten. A couple of early reviews (1956-57) were the result of friendship with David Cairns. I had launched him as a record reviewer; he was in a position to let me write for *The Times Educational Supplement*.

The only time I have tried my hand as a very faltering producer was for Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* at Gordonstoun School, when I was also conducting. The chorus of not very expert boys in what was, I suppose, Carthaginian white, had to be kept in formation as close as a boxful of sweets irrevocably stuck together, except when they danced. The dense black clouds of malice created by the witches and the chemistry department were driven by a light wind on to the orchestra so that music disappeared from sight and throats were incapacitated by smoke. The situation was saved by the unbelievable beauty of the setting, within the large round steading that is the architectural glory of the school,

by summer nights when the limpid Scottish sky smiled throughout, and by a local Dido and Belinda as enchanting musically as they were captivating in interplay and movement.

My first visit to Bayreuth (1957) took place in one of the Gordonstoun years. This was by courtesy of Sir Robert Mayer, for whose children's concerts I had written some programme notes, and with the sympathetic connivance of the headmaster. It was dormitory accommodation, but Wieland Wagner was in control at the Festspielhaus, with controversial productions that yet earned admiration for their elemental simplicity, removal of traditional clutter, subtle use of lighting, and shrewd exploitation of postwar austerity as a necessary virtue. I saw *Parsifal* twice, *The Ring*, *Tristan* and *Meistersinger*. Wahnfried was still ruinous, but Wilhelmine's (sister of Frederick the Great) 18th-century Bayreuth was there as counterpoise to the gripping dramas summoning us Act by Act through enticing hints on balcony brass of the portentous music to come. Woodland walks were the means for needed interval recovery, as I have found ever since.

A web of Warburg intrigue somehow whisked me from Gordonstoun to Menotti's Festival of Two Worlds at Spoleto in 1962, where I was assistant conductor for two gruelling months. The three operas were *Le Comte Ory*, *Carmen* and *The Love for Three Oranges*, firm favourites ever since. The first two were conducted by Thomas Schippers, the last by Julius Rudel. As rehearsal pianist I had to coach and cajole, drilling Franco Boniselli as the Prince in Prokofiev, and playing ultimately for the final pre-orchestral stage rehearsal. Apart from working with Shirley Verrett, chaperoned by strictly religious parents, and George Shirley in their roles, my most fascinating *Carmen* task was to play over and over again while Antonio Gades worked out his sequence of passionate dance steps with a ferocious concentration. In *Comte Ory* I reverted to a backstage peep-hole through which I relayed Schippers's beat to a chorus off.

Back in England, I wondered about Sadler's Wells. For audition I played much of *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, was tested on some *Magic Flute*, and quizzed on Wagner. I played with feeling but no success. Gordonstoun then provided an introduction to Elsa Mayer-Lismann, who needed a pianist-conductor for her opera workshop. It was a joy to work with Kathryn Pring as Aida and the Amneris of Anne Evans before both decided they were singing the wrong role. A long-range result was that Anne Evans twice sang soprano solo for me in the Verdi *Requiem*, at Southwark Cathedral and in the Albert Hall. Mayer-Lismann was a source of constant fascination to me, for an idiosyncratic English that would urge a budding Strauss Elektra to storm the stage with hair yet more 'dishvelled', or an acting bravura that conjured the *Magic Flute* serpent by wriggling her considerable bulk with convulsive movements across the floor.

Twenty-five years as conductor of the Bart's Choral Society, which grew from some 30 shy nurses and medical students in 1965 to a final Verdi *Requiem* in 1987 with choir of 600, allowed not only such titanic works as *A Mass of Life* by Delius and Mahler 8, but also operas in concert that included Gluck's *Orfeo* at Guildhall, *Fidelia* at the Central Hall, and a *Magic Flute* at the Albert Hall. In 1967 I was recruited by Stanley Sadie as an associate editor of *The Musical Times*, and a year later began the long series of reviews that form the bulk of this volume, arranged alphabetically. If recordings and opera tickets came my way by discretion of the editor, I can claim to have heard nothing I did not wish to hear but to have missed much I now ruefully regret.

Wagner forms the bulk of the reviews, as he should. If some of my writing seems cavalier, it is no more so than some productions I witnessed. Over the years my canon of excellence has been established, and I doubt if my favourite quartet of *The Magic Flute*, *Fidelio*, *Meistersinger* and *Falstaff* will ever be dislodged. All four feature largely in the ensuing pages, and I can express only gratitude to the press officers of Covent Garden, the Coliseum and Glyndebourne who have allowed so many evenings of pleasure, both memorable and maddening. Record companies have filled my shelves with LPs, CDs and now the delight of DVDs that mean I need hardly stir abroad again. Stanley Sadie launched me on this wondrous course; Basil Ramsey and Keith Bramich of *Music & Vision* are those who now sustain me.

The dedication of the book recalls a warm friendship with Professor Szweykowski and his wife. He welcomed me to his Department of the History and Theory of Music at the Jagiellonian University of Cracow. I had much pleasant talk with his students, whom I also addressed more formally. A number of them came later to London under the auspices of my Research Trust; it was also a major pleasure to welcome Zygmunt and Anna to my London home when they too needed a convenient base for their own research. I know for certain the earlier Italian operas I have touched on were familiar to them both; how much further their sympathies would have stretched in the book's lengthy chronological list, others can probably judge more accurately than I. It remains for me to acknowledge yet again the unstinting help provided by John Norris towards the final form of the book. It is he who set the reviews in order, provided the two chronologies at the end of the book, and organised the index. I have almost lost count of the number of my books he has guided towards publication. He is the most generous of colleagues, and somehow manages to accommodate all my whims in the midst of a very heavy schedule. My gratitude is unbounded.

Robert Anderson
July 2013