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Interview

Retrospect Opera: Reviving a Forgotten Mainstream

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Since 2016, Retrospect Opera (retrospectopera.org.uk) has issued a steady stream of recordings of musical theatre works that otherwise are generally little more than names mentioned in passing (occasionally with a short musical example) in narratives of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British music.[1] The project is a vital corrective, as this repertory was well known by audiences of its time, and part of an intricate web of influence on contemporaneous and subsequent works. Retrospect Opera has implemented a catholic approach to musical theatre, with a mix of widely familiar names (Charles Dibdin, George Grossmith, Charles Villiers Stanford, and Ethel Smyth among them) and lesser-known composers, and with works ranging from drawing-room entertainments to music drama. With five years of productivity, and with several tantalizing projects in the works, the time was ripe for a conversation with trustees David Chandler and Valerie Langfield.

Can you each describe how you became involved with this too-neglected repertory, and how Retrospect Opera came to be?

DC: For me, it really began with George Alexander Macfarren. Reading about the history of English opera, and especially Nicholas Temperley's seminal essay, 'Musical Nationalism in English Romantic Opera',[2] I found a compelling interest in Macfarren's quest to create a truly 'English' style of opera based on folk music. I was appalled to find that none of Macfarren's operas, and not much of his other music, had been recorded. I'm always driven most by a sense of injustice, and it seemed to me, frankly, that Macfarren had been treated shabbily by the very institutions that will often claim to be invested in 'British Heritage'. There's simply no way a Victorian novelist, poet, or painter of comparable importance would have

[1] For example, Andrew Lamb, 'Music of the Popular Theatre', in *The Athlone History of Music in Britain: The Romantic Age 1800–1914*, ed. Nicholas Temperley (London: Athlone Press, 1981): 92–108; Michael Hurd, 'Opera: 1834–1865', in *ibid.*, 307–29; Nigel Burton, 'Opera: 1865–1914', in *ibid.*, 330–57; and John Caldwell, *The Oxford History of English Music*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999): 176–210 and 246–58.

[2] Nicholas Temperley, 'Musical Nationalism in English Romantic Opera', in The Lost Chord: Essays on Victorian Music, ed. Nicholas Temperley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989): 143–58.

been so neglected. So, around 2008 I began lobbying Victorian Opera Northwest to record Macfarren's most successful opera, *Robin Hood* (1860). For a long time they hesitated between *Robin Hood* and some forgotten cantatas by Sullivan. However, persistence finally paid off and *Robin Hood* was recorded in 2010 and released, to very good reviews, in 2011. Valerie prepared the score and parts for that recording, as she had for earlier VONW projects, and this is how we came into contact. We first met on 4 October 2011, in London, and Valerie introduced me to Andy King, a young PhD student also very interested in British opera. Though none of us knew it at the time, that afternoon was the moment Retrospect Opera emerged as at least a distant possibility. Then a year later, I met Valerie in Manchester and she just sort of said 'why don't we, with Andy, start a new recording company?' I think within an hour or so of her asking that question we'd already decided that Ethel Smyth's *The Boatswain's Mate* would be a good place to begin!

VL: Yes, that's pretty much it! *The Boatswain's Mate* was David's suggestion, and it made a lot of sense, this opera being a medium-scale work which had proved very successful in its own time. In fact, it was more suitable than we imagined, as we discovered that Smyth had produced her own reduced orchestration of the score, and we used that–and this has given the opera something of a new lease of life in the theatre. I did go round in circles for a bit, wondering how we were actually going to set about making and distributing recordings, but I knew it could be done, and we just took one step at a time, dealing with each learning curve as we came to it! As a recording company, we began with three tenets: professional resources, realistically funded, and properly run. We were keen to become a charity, so we'd have access to more financial help, and that happened in October 2015. We also considered whether to follow Victorian Opera Northwest's way of working, making a recording and then basically selling it to an existing label, but we decided we preferred to retain full editorial control over how the finished product looked – we didn't like the idea of a label saying we couldn't include a full libretto, or that we couldn't have all the essays we wanted. We work on a highly collaborative basis, both within Retrospect Opera itself, and also with our various artists: we've never wanted, in any way, a 'them-and-us' atmosphere, and anyone can talk to anyone else – we don't want lines of demarcation, and we find that this approach is really satisfying and productive. Recording is very intense, so on those days, our priority is to create an environment where all the artists can feel free to do what they're best at, and can also go away having enjoyed themselves. And little things such as providing *really* nice biscuits matter! Obviously we do have a mission – to put British opera on the map – but we want it to be enjoyable for everyone involved too, a collaborative effort.

DC: We should add that Chris Wiley joined us in summer 2016, first as a publicity officer, then later as a trustee too. And then in 2020 Benjamin Hamilton became our fifth trustee.

Retrospect Opera makes recordings rather than stages productions. Recordings have the advantage of greater longevity and reach, and in the 1990s and early 2000s CDs were a great format for disseminating applied musicology – historically informed performance recordings with extensive booklet essays. Do you have any plans to adapt your end-products as the market has been shifting away from CDs and toward streaming?

DC: This is one of our central challenges, for sure! In fact, our recordings are available through streaming services and on YouTube, but in these cases consumers are generally getting just the music itself, not the edited text and liner notes which come with the CD. I think we all feel the attractiveness of the CD and accompanying booklet format, and we would like to somehow replicate that experience in a non-physical medium, but like other labels we feel we haven't quite got there yet. There's also the related issue of monetization, of course. If CDs are bought, especially if they are bought direct from us, that contributes significantly to our income. By contrast, streaming brings in very little. It's probably never been easier to find an audience for little-known music, but, conversely, finding people willing to pay for it is getting harder and harder!

You've done quite a bit of Ethel Smyth. How far forward into the twentieth century do you see yourself extending?

DC: Smyth has indeed been fairly central to our endeavours since we launched ourselves with *The Boatswain's Mate*. There are several reasons for this: we all believe in the value of her operas; we've been able to work with Odaline de la Martinez, who was already established as a pioneering Smyth advocate; and Chris Wiley[3] is a leading Smyth scholar (he's currently editing two books devoted to her and her music). On top of that, there's the fact that it's actually been a good deal easier to obtain grants for the revival of women's music. Frustratingly, we've been unable to find the full score of her last opera, *Entente cordiale*, premiered in 1925. If we could find it, we'd almost certainly record it. We do have plans to record Granville Bantock's *The Seal Woman* of 1924. I suspect these dates will represent the forward limit of our project, but if something really good emerges from the late 1920s or 1930s, we'd certainly give it serious consideration.

VL: Whether something is in or out of copyright is also a consideration, because we don't have the funding or admin to deal with the copyright fees; or, perhaps more significantly, if the librettist or the composer is still in copyright there can be issues with permissions. Smyth had just gone out of copyright when we started.

Is musical comedy outside your purview? If so, why?

DC: In my understanding, there's a fairly fine shade between operetta or light comic opera and musical comedy. And our second recording, Edward Solomon's *Pickwick* of 1889, created as a vehicle for Arthur Cecil (1843–96), comes close to marking that line, though one of the things we really liked about it was that it has very little spoken dialogue. Two lessons we learnt from *Pickwick* were, first, that most of the financial support came in on the basis of it being an adaptation of a Charles Dickens story; and second, that almost every reviewer insisted on comparing Solomon with Sullivan and declaring the former – who had never been recorded before – as not as good, often with a sort of 'why bother?' implication. This is the most discouraging kind of criticism, as

[3] See Christopher Wiley, 'Music and literature: Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and "the First Woman to Write an Opera"', in *Musical Quarterly* 96/2 (2013): 263–95.

it ultimately advocates for a limited canon of endlessly reproduced classics: you know, 'why listen to *Pickwick* when you could *re*listen to *Patience*?' So though I'd personally like to explore this sort of repertoire more, and Kurt Gänzl is particularly keen that we do Solomon's hugely successful *Billee Taylor* (1880), it's hard to see how we can fund such projects and ensure they get evaluated on their own merits and artistic aspirations rather than in invidious comparison with something else.

Are you limiting yourself to works which do not exist already in other commercial recordings?

DC: Yes, unless the only commercial recording available is particularly bad. It's really hard to get any of these recordings funded, and we can only assume it would be even harder if we had to admit a decent recording already existed.

Tell me about how your team establishes a performing text for these projects. Your website says that "we obtain copies of the original materials, usually a manuscript score, and typeset it, straightening out inconsistencies and mistakes in the original". Can you give some examples of textual dilemmas you've faced?

VL: The process is often quite straightforward, actually. As part of our decision-making process, we have to find out what source materials there are – a manuscript, which is what we had for the Smyth works (*Boatswain's Mate* and *Fête Galante*) and Loder's *Raymond and Agnes*, or a published edition, which is what we used for *Pickwick*, and the various Dibdin pieces. We're using the published score for Macfarren's *Soldier's Legacy*, and the manuscript full score of Stanford's *Shamus O'Brien*.

Loder has been the biggest challenge. He was rather inconsistent and vague, especially in how he notated for the low brass instruments – the notes were grouped, sometimes onto just one stave, with less than four notes given, so it was a matter of judgement how to allocate notes to instruments. If there had been any parts available, it would have been fascinating to see how the copyists of the day dealt with that; as it was, I just considered what would provide the best balance. And there was one aria, 'Rage Thou Angry Tempest', right at the start of Act 3, that's in the vocal score but not in the manuscript – there's a note explaining that it was in only because the singer basically wanted his own show-piece aria. It had now been removed, since it 'impede[d] the progress of the plot'.

It is a truism that the autograph manuscript of a musical theatre piece may not be the most useful resource in determining the text as actually performed – so many alterations happen in rehearsal that may never make it into the composer's manuscript. Your website indicates that you seek to convey a version where "what you hear is what the composer really intended". Is that a reachable ideal, particularly given the wide range of works you have produced?

VL: That's always a moot point. Do you do what the composer originally wrote, or do you do a version arrived at after revisions? The trouble is, you don't necessarily know *why* a piece was revised, so if you choose to do a revised version, you may be

choosing to do something that was revised for completely unmusical reasons. But equally, if you do the very first version, it may have been, say, far too long, too much dialogue, unbalanced in some way, such that a modern audience might say, well, no wonder it wasn't very popular. But on balance, we reckon the right thing to do *for a recording* is to give the version as close as we can get to the composer's original intentions. A performance might well do something different, with all sorts of adjustments, and rightly so – but at least they're starting from a firm base line, or as firm as we can get, and not influenced by our decisions on what constitutes a suitable version. With *Raymond and Agnes*, we were aware that it had had only a few performances in Manchester, and there was a long gap between that and its London performances, and we know that in the meantime it was revised – but the autograph manuscript we have is the revised version, and we don't have enough source material to be able to work backwards. So in that instance, we had no option but to do the revised version. We did make a few – very few – small cuts, where frankly both Richard Bonynge and I felt it did the composer no favours to include absolutely every note.

Are textual cuts made only for time – to fit on a CD – or are there other factors in those decisions?

DC: In general, our belief is that when an opera or related theatrical work was originally heard with both music and spoken dialogue, the latter should be preserved in a modern recording. Indeed, the fact that earlier recordings so often cut spoken dialogue was one factor inspiring us to believe we could do better in creating dramatically coherent listening experiences. However, having said that, Britain produced so many works in which beautiful songs are divided by pages and pages of spoken dialogue, that we sometimes have to ask ourselves: does an audience, primarily interested in the music, really want to hear all that? This is not about the length of the CD, but about getting a balance that works for a musically inclined listener. So there's an element of case-by-case. With *The Boatswain's Mate* and *Pickwick*, say, we recorded all the original spoken dialogue, as there wasn't all that much, and with *Christmas Gambols* we recorded it all, because although there's quite a lot, the continuous interplay between speaking and singing is absolutely integral to Dibdin's concept, and Simon Butteriss can make it work so well. On the other hand, with George Grossmith's *Cups and Saucers* we did shorten the spoken dialogue a good deal, as it seemed excessive for a purely listening experience.

VL: And we found some of the spoken text of *Raymond and Agnes* just a little too flowery at times, and did tweak it occasionally, usually by very light cuts. For example, in Act 1, the original goes:

> **Theo.** Nymph of the Convent yonder. Mum!
> **Fran.** O! Honour! Some pretty Novice?
> **Theo.** Pretty! Cheeks blooming – lips pouting. Master and I are no anchorites: we fell six feet deep in love at first sight at the Carnival at Madrid. What a dream of ecstasy – but –
> **Fran.** But – ?
> **Theo.** Her brute of a guardian locked up our divinity in a nunnery.

We pruned lightly to:

> **Theo.** Nymph of the convent yonder.
> **Fran.** Some pretty Novice?
> **Theo.** Pretty! Cheeks blooming – lips pouting. Master and I fell six feet deep in love at first sight at the Carnival at Madrid. What a dream of ecstasy – but – her brute of a guardian locked her up in a nunnery.

Can you comment on the voices you seek out for these projects? Are you looking for singers with particular types of musical or music-theatrical experience?

VL: Absolutely! it's very much a matter of seeking the right voice for the role. Having said that, we like to have a mixture of singers – singers who are relatively new to the profession, as well as ones with wide experience. For *The Boatswain's Mate*, Odaline de la Martinez auditioned the singers, and we were delighted to have Nadine Benjamin as Mrs Waters – she's gone on to great things at English National Opera. When we did *Pickwick*, it was an absolute no-brainer to have Simon Butteriss, with his impeccable timing, and diction and pacing, and his range of voices (we were in stitches in rehearsals), and he suggested Gaynor Keeble and Toby Stafford-Allen.

We auditioned for a treble for the small role of Mrs Bardell's son Tommy, and we also auditioned a number of wonderful singers for *The Soldier's Legacy* – they were all postgrads from the RNCM. We chose the soprano Rachel Speirs and tenor Ranald McCusker, and they're partnered by Quentin Hayes, who sang the assassin-bandit in *Raymond and Agnes*, and by Gaynor Keeble again – they both have the most wonderful sense of timing, which is what's needed in such a lovely little comedy piece. We've also got Edward Dean on harmonium – we were keen to find an instrumental sound that was authentic for the period. It was the same when we recorded the various items for the Dibdin *Jubilee* CD – we brought in period instrument players, and recorded at the Richard Burnett Heritage Collection, where Stephen Higgins played an 1801 Broadwood piano.

We talk to agents too, and when we did *Raymond and Agnes* we were helped so much by Jeremy and Sally Silver. Through the National Opera Studio, they knew the up-and-coming voices, so alongside the well-established Carolyn Dobbin, Mark Milhofer and Andrew Greenan, we also had Alessandro Fisher, amongst several others – Alessandro became a BBC New Generation artist soon after. In *Fête Galante*, we invited Carolyn and Mark back, and Felix Kemp sang with us for the first time. It's impossible to mention all the singers! But every single one is carefully chosen and invited because of what we know they will bring to the role. It's a similar matter for the conductors too: for the two Smyth works, we really wanted Odaline – she's the obvious person for Smyth – and we were so pleased when she agreed. And it was a real joy and privilege to work with Richard Bonynge on *Raymond and Agnes*.

Regarding casting, do you look at what other productions the original cast members were in? Were those original singers part of companies like Carl Rosa or D'Oyly Carte or the German Reeds – and does that help you find the right voice?

VL: It's certainly very helpful when vocal scores name the original singers. If the singer was a famous name, you know straightaway that the role is an important

one, and it might also tell you that even though the vocal score says it's a baritone, the role is actually a bass-baritone, for example. But actually, the music itself tells you the kind of voice that's needed. When we were casting Mrs Bardell in *Pickwick*, say, as you read the score, you can practically hear the kind of voice it wants.

Some of your recordings have piano accompaniment – and for drawing-room entertainments, this is perfectly appropriate. But for those works where there was a pit band, what are we losing? I think of Sullivan's piquant orchestrations, which are really not conveyed in the piano reductions. Hiring an orchestra for each of your projects would increase the costs tremendously – making the whole thing unsustainable; but are there any instances so far where you feel that the use of the piano has compromised the effectiveness of the show?

DC: Well, it's important to stress that we've never used a piano accompaniment when an orchestral score was available. Boosey fortunately included *Pickwick* in their series of 'Operettas for the Drawing-Room', but unfortunately that is the only score to survive. It would certainly have been wonderful to hear Solomon's orchestral score, though as partial amends we can, as you suggest, offer a glimpse of what a particularly good private performance in a Victorian drawing-room might have been like. Would critics have been less inclined to make invidious comparisons with Sullivan if they heard an orchestral recording? It strains optimism to think so!

The only other work for which this has been an issue is the Garrick-Dibdin *Jubilee* of 1769, the earliest piece we have recorded. David Garrick conceived of this as a sumptuous show, and in fact it enjoyed a longer continuous run than any other work of eighteenth-century British theatre. It would have been utterly impossible to recreate this in a form in any way approximating the experience of visiting Drury Lane in 1769. But the songs, the comedy and the epochal Shakespeare celebration that *The Jubilee* marked seemed much too good to be forgotten, so Simon Butteriss and I created a chamber version for four singers and a piano that, we hope, can be enjoyed as an audio experience – and that might just inspire small-scale staged revivals. Apart from the obvious point that an audio recording is always very different from a visit to the theatre, this is the only time we've recorded a version of a work not endorsed by the composer, though I like to think Dibdin would approve!

I know you have some exciting and ambitious projects in the works. Looking ahead, do you expect probing in depth around the repertoire you have surveyed thus far, or do you seek to broaden it further chronologically, or in any other way?

DC: Next up we have Macfarren's *The Soldier's Legacy* of 1864, a project very dear to me, and that in a sense will pick up from what was achieved with *Robin Hood*. I think it will tie several aspects of our work together, in a sense linking Dibdin's bluff, unselfconscious 'Englishness' with Smyth's deliberate adoption of folk music in *The Boatswain's Mate*. I'll let Valerie say something about Stanford's *Shamus O'Brien*, which we hope will be the next project subsequent to *The Soldier's Legacy*, to be followed in turn by *The Seal Woman*. After that, there's a long list of possible projects to pursue – inevitably so when this tradition of music-making has been so neglected in the past. I think our chronological limits are now fairly well mapped out, though we might go a bit earlier just to record John Frederick Lampe's *The Dragon of Wantley* of 1737.

We'd all love to do more English Romantic operas of the early Victorian period for sure, but the big question is how to fund them. We couldn't have done *Raymond and Agnes* without the very generous financial support Nicholas Temperley gave us, and he was able to influence other people to support it, too. In general, though, it's been surprisingly hard to find people with a specialized interest in this repertoire who are actually willing to sponsor recordings, even at the £25 level. This means we have to choose projects that can be successfully pitched to non-specialists – *Pickwick* and Dickens is a good example, as I've mentioned before. I would warmly encourage readers of this interview to let us know what you think we should be recording, and any suggestions accompanied by the promise of financial support will certainly be taken very seriously! For the foreseeable future we have to balance artistic excellence and historical significance against the simple, practical question of where funding will come from.

VL: Yes, our choices are obviously affected by many factors. As with concert programming, it's a balance between what we'd like to do, what is representative of the British heritage, and what will attract sponsors. So yes, we do want to have a range of repertoire, but we also have to be realistic. We aim for a 'big' project every now and then, with smaller ones in between. *Shamus* is clearly a big one, and we're absolutely delighted that this is going to be a collaboration with BBC Radio 3. They'll provide the orchestra (the BBC Concert Orchestra), the venue, and other resources, and we're discussing the rest. The Stanford Society is supporting us substantially with that. *Shamus* will give us – we hope – a significant platform, and a bit more financial freedom to fund projects that we think are really important, but which might prove hard to fund. Incidentally, the two operas on my bucket list are John Barnett's *The Mountain Sylph*, and Loder's *The Night Dancers*!

DC: Right now, I suppose top of my bucket list would be Dibdin's *The Waterman* of 1774. Perhaps I can quote Kurt Gänzl on this: 'for more than a century the show enjoyed a popularity second to none (not even *The Beggar's Opera*) amongst English ballad operas. [It was] played endlessly through Britain and its colonies'. It's a particularly powerful example, but we are struck constantly by the way works that proved themselves in performance after performance in the past, which became 'classics' if you will, have been allowed to disappear to the point where few people can even name them. We'll never be able to right all the wrongs, but every revival feels like a triumph of art over time and neglect.