



MOZART AT GLYNDEBOURNE

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Mozart at Glyndebourne

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I wish that I could say that I was a member of that small company which, drawn by friendship, curiosity, hope, or simple faith, boarded the historic train which went from Victoria to Sussex in May 1934 for the inaugural performance of *Le nozze di Figaro*. Nor, I am ashamed to say, did I go in 1935. I thought only about the Salzburg Festival, which I visited every year from 1929 until the *Anschluss*. I was not, before the war, as I now am, an addicted reader of periodicals, and had simply not taken in the new musical phenomenon. Nobody I spoke to at Oxford, where I lived as undergraduate and don, so much as mentioned Glyndebourne's existence before 1936 at the earliest. Yet I did not move in wholly philistine circles.

In 1936 I did go to Glyndebourne, and heard a performance of *Le nozze di Figaro* which, as I can confidently testify after almost fifty years, I still remember vividly: and remember as having been simply wonderful. Mariano Stabile was the best Figaro I have ever heard, in Salzburg and Milan as well as Glynde[102]bourne; and he was, if anything, even better in Rossini's *Barbieri*. The Countess at Glyndebourne, in that year and later, was the Finnish singer Aulikki Rautawaara. The conductor and director were then, and for many excellent years, Fritz Busch and Carl Ebert. Busch was the equal of, and at times superior to, even Franz Schalk and Bruno Walter; and the Glyndebourne orchestra under him rose to unexpected heights. Ebert must have been the best director of classical opera in Europe. Both were, as is not always the case with even the most gifted artists, men of inborn aesthetic sense and taste; and no composer requires this as much as Mozart. The orchestra was far less accomplished than the Vienna Philharmonic, yet the freshness, the wit, the sheer verve, the inner pulse, the forward movement, the marvellous enthusiasm lifted it above any performance of *Figaro* I had heard in Salzburg, Munich or anywhere else.

Lotte Lehmann in Salzburg was incomparably the best Countess that I or any member of my generation could have

heard; but both the Count (Brownlee) and Figaro (Stabile) acted and sang better at Glyndebourne; Cherubino (Helletsgruber) and Susanna (Mildmay) both sang exquisitely. Not only the gardens, the flowers, the summer evening, the novelty of it all, but that something so enchanting could happen in England at all, that was to me – and surely to many others – a source of lasting astonishment and delight.

There were, of course, the Covent Garden summer seasons, with international casts, often marvellous. But a festival devoted to a particular composer or particular type of opera is something very different. A combination of a great many factors is needed to constitute a festival of the first order. There is the pattern formed by the relationships of the works performed; there is the central conception, the precise direction of the imagination, the [103] care and unrelenting concentration, which generate a particular style; there are the genuine love of music and responsiveness of the audience; above all, the quality of ensemble, the depth of inner understanding which, for example, players of chamber music can achieve at their best – a coherent vision which singers and players can attain, but all too seldom do. The ensembles achieved at Glyndebourne were, and are, of unique quality, found, so far as I can tell, nowhere else.

The right combination of these elements can be reached momentarily even under repertory conditions: but continuously only where long preparation and patient genius are at work. Busch and Ebert created ensembles which approached perfection. This was made possible at Glyndebourne where the entire company lived together for many weeks – their lives and artistic work became interwoven with one another's during the late spring and early summer months, so that even those of moderate gifts were inspired to rise above themselves. The guidance of the two great masters filled the musicians with sufficient confidence in their own powers to achieve a degree of understanding that enabled them to create their own unique version of the great Mozart operas. The working conditions at Glyndebourne were and are unique. Who, in their senses, could have predicted then with confidence that in an England not notably devoted to opera in general, or Mozart in particular, such a venture could be successful? So brilliantly successful almost immediately after the first few performances?

As everyone knows, this would not have happened without the peerless personality of John Christie. He had the single-mindedness of a secular visionary; he swept aside objections and apparently insuperable difficulties pointed out to him by cautious advisers. His boldness, indomitable will and total independence – above all this [104] last attribute, more often found in England fifty years ago than it is today (for reasons on which I will not speculate), were a major cultural asset to our country. Like every great intendant in the history of opera, he displayed a degree of personal authority, indeed, of the indispensable element of *terribilità*, which rivalled that of Diaghilev and Toscanini.

It was easier, after all, to create the Salzburg Festival – music in general and opera in particular had been for many years an intrinsic part of Austrian culture and life. Opera in this sense, despite the international seasons at Covent Garden, was not part of the British cultural heritage. John Christie intuitively understood how to realise his ideal, more, I suspect, by instinct and temperament than by rational calculation – the mere appointment of Busch and Ebert was an inspired decision.

Neither of these great masters was a pioneer of methods of interpretation of classical works. Both, I believe, took it for granted that no matter how closely a musical score was related to every nuance of the words or the story, it and it alone played the dominant role: *prima la musica*. The essence of the drama was conveyed by the music. It followed that what mattered above all else was the quality of the singers, the orchestra, the conductor and the chorus master.

After the revolution brought about by Wagner and the conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, production and design in opera were intended, above all, to serve the music and the words: this alone required the producer, in particular, to be profoundly musical. The libretti might carry clear moral or social or political implications, like those of, for example, *Figaro* or *Fidelio*; but this was not, in the days of which I am writing, as yet generally thought to require additional underlining by the production or the decor: it was assumed that the words and [105] music carried their own overt meaning, given them consciously by their creators; all this set limits to the freedom of performers and producers alike.

Even after the rise of the modern movement in poetry and the visual arts, and despite the bold new stage productions of

Meyerhold in Moscow and Piscator in Berlin in the 1920s, relatively little attempt was made to bring out by extra-musical means the 'inner' political, sociological or psycho-pathological significance of the libretti and the scores, of which the composer and poet showed no conscious awareness. The political import of, say, *Figaro* was, no doubt, clear enough to Mozart and Da Ponte, and certainly to Beaumarchais and the imperial censors, that of *Rigoletto* and *Don Carlos* to Victor Hugo and Schiller, as well as to Verdi and probably his librettists. But there is, so far as I know, no evidence that – even if any of these artists suspected that their creative imagination might be affected by subliminal forces – they were the unconscious vehicles which carried psychological or sociological content very different from their own conscious conceptions and purposes; that they wished these latent structures or drives to be revealed by the type of techniques later employed by symbolists, expressionists, surrealists, dialectical materialists and the like. Whatever the value of this kind of approach to art in general, and opera in particular – and its interest and originality cannot be denied – it is the product of our own day. Neither the composers nor the librettists of the golden age of European opera, from Gluck to the First World War, so far as I know, thought in this fashion; nor did their most admired interpreters before and after and during the interwar years. Neither Fritz Busch nor Bruno Walter, neither Arturo Toscanini nor Erich Kleiber, supposed that they were engaged on a task of exhumation, of attempting to breathe a kind of new life – sometimes drawn from the world of the unconscious, [106] individual or collective – into what might otherwise remain noble corpses, museum pieces of little contemporary significance. The masterpieces of both the past and the present spoke to them directly, without reference to processes unknown to their creators, and they, and their producers and designers, so conveyed them.

This, too, has in general been the practice of their most gifted successors – we have not been lacking in conductors of genius in our own day. I wish to offer no judgements on the explicit value of these wide differences of approach. The new conception of the immense importance of the producer and the designer, as called upon to lay bare non-rational processes in the minds of the librettist and the composer, and their personal or social roots, can be fascinating, and in the hands of musically gifted producers has

been sociologically and aesthetically revealing and transforming; and this effect may well be permanent. I wish to do no more than point to the difference between this attitude and the ideals of the founders of Glyndebourne, which seem to me to have given life and sustenance for half a century to this nobly conceived and entirely delightful institution. Long may it flourish.

In 1936 all five of Mozart's most celebrated operas were performed at Glyndebourne. Few who heard Alexander Kipnis (identified correctly, but oddly, as American) as Sarastro in *Die Zauberflöte* are likely to forget it; nor Salvatore Baccaloni as Osmin, nor Julia Moor as Constanze, in *Die Entführung*. Moreover, wonder of wonders, it presently became clear that good British singers existed: excellent artists such as Roy Henderson or David Franklin, who, provided they were given adequate conditions, could hold their own in the company of celebrated foreign virtuosi.

Of course the charm and beauty of the Sussex countryside, the divine nature of the music, the technical perfection and exceptional artistic quality of the performances, and, year after year, the undiminished sense of occasion, all played their part in creating the idyll. For such it was for me and, I wish to believe, for most of the audience at Glyndebourne. But there was also something else: the spontaneity, informality, lack of solemnity of the atmosphere, the total absence of the kind of pomp and circumstance which were such an inevitable (and to their audiences to some extent welcome) attribute of Salzburg and, more particularly, Bayreuth; the sense of continuous enjoyment pervaded everything. All this was, without question, principally due to the personality and clearly felt dictatorship – unpredictable, benevolent, idiosyncratic, generous, life-giving – of one man.

I well remember, both before and after the war, the wonderful spectacle of John Christie, vaguely John-Bull-like, perhaps more Churchillian, standing in front of his opera house, at the point at which the cars and buses discharge their loads of visitors, waving them on with impatient gestures into the open doors of the building, much as he must once have marshalled boys at Eton during his career as a master in that establishment. His presence – despite the motley international amalgam of artists, visitors, critics – made the scene utterly and indescribably English, not British but English.

I recall a most exhilarating *Don Pasquale* and a good, but not exceptional, *Macbeth*. But my predominant memories of Glyndebourne before the war are, naturally enough, of Mozart. I have mentioned excellent British singers. As for the masters from abroad, no one who heard Willi Domgraf-Fassbänder as Figaro, Guglielmo, Papageno; Irene Eisinger as Despina, Blondchen, Barbarina; Luise Helletsgruber as Elvira, Dorabella, Cherubino; Salvatore Baccaloni as Leporello; Stabile and Baccaloni as Figaro and Bartolo, or as Malatesta and Don [108] Pasquale; Walter Ludwig as Belmonte – no one who heard these could possibly ask for a higher degree of musical pleasure, short-lived but intense.

When the young and the middle-aged say, as they often do, that it is a common illusion of the old that there were better singers and performances in the days of their youth, this is not always so: gramophone records (and even some memories) do not delude. The recorded ensembles towards the end of the second act of *Figaro*, in the scene of parting in the first act of *Così*, or the unmasking of Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, are there to testify to the reliability of our memories.

Glyndebourne spread its wings far more widely after the war. *Fidelio*, the brilliant succession of Rossini comedies conducted by Vittorio Gui – a repertoire which outdid the Piccola Scala – the operas of Richard Strauss, Britten, Stravinsky, Donizetti, Bellini, Henze, Monteverdi, Cavalli, Prokofiev, Janáček: the mounting of these with varying, but often splendid, results, is a source of justified pride on the part of the house.

But it is, in the end, its first love – the operas of Mozart – which has continued at the heart of the enterprise. Of course Munich, Vienna, Covent Garden have served Mozart nobly, and above all Salzburg then and now. But I wish to testify that for me, and I believe I speak for a good many of us in this country, the idea of what an opera by Mozart is and can be, was altered – indeed, transformed – by Glyndebourne and it alone. For a good many members of my generation it was the performances (and, perhaps, at least as much the magnificent recordings, technically imperfect as they must now seem) that shaped our outlook, and vastly raised the ceiling of our expectations. I cannot help rehearsing the sacred litany again: Willi Domgraf-Fassbänder and (the now almost forgotten) Aulikki Rautawaara, John Brownlee and Ivar Andresen, Mariano Stabile and [109] Salvatore Baccaloni,

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Irene Eisinger, Audrey Mildmay and Luise Helletsgruber – even the mysterious Zinaida Lisichkina (over-correctly and uninformatively identified as Nicaraguan) as Queen of the Night – and, above all, the matchless ensembles which only Glyndebourne seemed (and still seems) able to generate.

All this became for us the original ideal, the Platonic Idea, imprinted for life on our memory and imagination, no matter how much overlaid and transformed by later experiences, of what the canonical operas by Mozart (including *Idomeneo*) are and remain. It may be that I speak for myself alone. I am reluctant to believe this, but even if it is so, I can say only that in that dawn it was bliss (musically, not at all socially or politically) to be alive.

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