

UNFORESEEN AFFINITIES: GLYN

by Liveryman Douglas Craig

A graceful invitation, couched in the persuasive language one expects from the Livery, to write about something I'd enjoyed doing, sent me rummaging through my shelves like a snuffling ruminant and brought me to rest in the year 1934, when I saw my first opera – *Die Fledermaus* – at Sadler's Wells. At the time I was learning German, amongst other things, in the hope of a scholarship to Cambridge, but even so, my adolescent ignorance was such that I didn't know *Die Fledermaus* was a celebrated "funny", nor, probably did I know that Sadler's Wells had been established in 1931 under the management of the indomitable Lilian Baylis with a charter to provide quality performances "at prices affordable by the artisan and the working man". Nor, as a callow youth, would I have been aware that – also in 1934, a country gentleman in Sussex had built an opera house in his extensive garden – Glyndebourne. Would the twain ever meet?

Sadler's Wells continued to enjoy its reputation as Theatre for Everybody, but a quote from the Glyndebourne programme of 1936 read "It may be suggested that what has been achieved at Glyndebourne is an exclusive pleasure for the rich. That, however, has never been the

intention, the whole enterprise is too serious, too disinterested to be cultivated for snobbish reasons. It would be a tragedy if Glyndebourne became merely a social occasion – it would destroy its aim and dispirit the enterprise. Glyndebourne is for the artist and lover of art, and their cooperation is what is most necessary for its continued success. England has no national theatres; its cities have no civic opera houses. We can defend our official attitude towards art by maintaining that art flourishes best in freedom".

The germ of the conflict of people versus the elite and of London versus the Provinces has lurked in the offices of the purse-string holders for as long as I can remember, which is now getting on for fifty years. After the last war there were conspicuous signs of this rift. There was a growing vogue for what you might call "peopledom", often inimicable to the sensitive musician.

Shortly after the end of the last war, a parcel of Lithuanians presented themselves to the British Council seeking engagements to perform operatic excerpts in the UK. The British Council response was "frightfully sorry; we're the export department. Pop round the corner and try the Arts Council." They did, and were booked for a tour of the

Provinces. Since Lithuanian is a language with distinctly archaic linguistic affinities, there wasn't much chance of their being clearly understood, so they were provided with a skilled compere. They were a great success and it occurred to the Arts Council that it might be worth while continuing this experiment, by sending out a group of British singers performing operatic excerpts in the vernacular to small communities who might otherwise see no opera at all for years to come. I was engaged to arrange the programme and to compere.

Our first tour began in slate coloured Blaenau Ffestiniog. The Arts Council representative for North Wales asked us to sing the Welsh National Anthem. This was a thunderbolt – we didn't know it! That didn't matter, she said, "Just sing 'my hen laid a haddock on top of a tree' and they'll be in with you." Quivering with shock, we did, and they were. This lovely lady also said she was delighted we were going down so well, because they only understood one word in five of what I was saying. This was a bitter affront to my pride as the former winner of the Cambridge University Prize for the declamation of the English language.

Naturally, this tour was a success! But it convinced me that although the concept was right, the presentation was wrong. We were called the Grand Opera Group, we wore white waistcoats and evening gowns and we stood and delivered our arias in a highly stylised way to a flat cap and muffler audience. I had no doubt we were in danger of preserving the legend that opera is a stilted, ridiculous and madly toffee-nosed entertainment. I said so to the Arts Council and was given a free hand to try out any ideas I might have. The first decision was that we should change the name of the enterprise to "Opera for All", to get away from the exclusivity of the previous title and, secondly, that even with the most modest of costumes, scenery and lighting, we must give the drama and the music equal importance. The singers must also be actors, and furthermore they should be willing to perform a multiplicity of duties.

It also became clear that we needed expertise in a number of ways – decor, lighting, costumes, wigs, props and stage management. But the Arts Council warned me, in no uncertain terms, that we must not price ourselves out of the market for which we were intended. I think this was the first of many occasions in my career when I encountered this dictum delivered to me in the shape of an arbitrary order from on high. With these instructions we went forth upon our pilgrimage.

At that time, while some directors and producers were pursuing "immediacy" in opera production, Glyndebourne, on the other hand was leaving no nerve unstrained to present Mozart – *Figaro*, *Così*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Entführung* – with the utmost authenticity.



The author with the late Arnold Matters, Baritone just after his 86th birthday in Adelaide