

NEW WINE IN NEW BOTTLES

Dealing with brand new music

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It is something of a rare occurrence for a piece of music to be placed in front of the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House and for absolutely nobody to have seen it before. Even an obscure curiosity such as Charles Koechlin's *Les Bandar-log*, making its balletic debut with The Royal Ballet in 2000, had already been encountered by a senior player when working with the BBC Symphony Orchestra in the 1960s. So when an entirely new work such as *The Minotaur* is presented there is a very different working atmosphere in the pit from that when working on the regular operatic chestnuts. It is most definitely a level playing field for everyone.

With brand new material, it is almost impossible to be certain how the musical journey will unfold. Many hours of expensive orchestral rehearsal time are allocated in order that everyone can be confident of being faithful to the composer's intentions.

Even with the most rigorous preparation and checking, errors can and do slip into the printed parts and these must be identified and corrected – no easy task when it is not initially known exactly how discordant passages and myriads of notes in irregular bar lengths are meant to sound. Time is very much of the essence, and the unforgiving Royal Opera House schedule with its multiple concurrent projects does not allow for additional hours of rehearsal to be arranged at short notice.

Of course, professional musicians are 'programmed' to play any material accurately and correct their own wrong notes, and what may have been considered unplayable a couple of decades ago is now taken very much in the Orchestra's stride. There is inevitably a challenge in getting the pit layout to be as helpful as possible. Initial rehearsals can be confusing. Is the passage that the second clarinet is playing exactly the same as that of the violas that he can hear from the other side of the pit? Or is it meant to be a semiquaver apart? Harrison Birtwistle scores for an 85-piece orchestra in *The Minotaur*, and this is something of a squeeze, with the extensive percussion section spilling out into the audience seating, making overall precision all the more tricky. The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 must also be considered, adding further considerations to an already highly complex situation when 'robust' pieces are scheduled. A cellist's hearing could suffer from being in front of the louder brass instruments for extended periods and woodwind players can find it a struggle to be near the heavier percussion instruments for many days at a time. The use of screens, personal awareness and common sense normally prevail.

As the rehearsal process unfolds, the seeming randomness falls away, the musical landscape becomes clearer, musical landmarks emerge, vocal layers fall into place and the enormous challenge of putting it all together begins to be met. Bass trombonist Keith McNicoll recalls the preparation for the premiere of *The Minotaur* in 2008; even at a first

glance he knew that his part was very well written for the instrument and nothing like the intense wall of sound that he had encountered in Gawain. He was pleased that Antonio Pappano allowed orchestra members to take a few moments out of the early stage rehearsals to observe some of the action from the auditorium, a huge help in gaining a sense of context, and a far cry from the experience of the late Alan Taylor, who clocked up more than fifty years on the timpani in the ROH pit and never once saw *Swan Lake*.

Living composers can and do change their minds about what they have written, and there is a natural process of constant evolution. The stakes are high. No longer is it possible to do as Léhar did on one occasion: quickly rehash unsuccessful material, put in a 'money song' for the lead tenor and change the name of the piece to *Das Land des Lächelns* (The Land of Smiles). Everyone will be more than aware of the pressure on the composer to deliver a well-orchestrated, well-balanced and engaging work involving hundreds of people, be prepared to suffer the ruthless judgement after the first night, and hope, along with the librettist and publisher, that the work may then even enter the standard repertory. The challenge for the performers is to give the best chance of life to the piece: without air through vocal cords, wind and brass, string friction and percussive strikes any composition is merely some symbols on a piece of paper.

The task of committing those symbols to paper or, in these modern times, to disc, is immensely time-consuming and can be underestimated. Lorin Maazel cleared months of his conducting schedule in order to finish *1984* on time, and it is no secret that Thomas Adès's *The Tempest* (2004) was not complete as rehearsals began, with fresh material arriving from the composer almost daily. This was no mean feat, as Tom was also conducting his own work. Indeed, one rehearsal was cut short so that 'the overture could be finished', and on opening night some orchestra members were bemused to find that further new notes had appeared in their parts as they turned their pages during the final act.

A concern for subsequent performance runs of any new music is that changes, additions and corrections may not make it into the first published score, which may later be considered the authoritative version. But the marked conductor's score and players' orchestral parts after the first performance are likely to be more accurate indications of what was actually performed. It can be a minefield for musicologists who, much later, try to work out from the conflicting details exactly what the composer's intentions were.

Practical considerations play their own part in the mix. An unusual level of musical complexity in *The Minotaur* is the requirement for the chorus and two onstage drummers in costume to perform at a completely separate tempo to that of the main orchestra. Timpanist Simon Archer remembers taking a van full of drums to the wilds of north-east London in 2008 in order to check that the instruments would install correctly into the 'trucks' needed to move them onto the stage. A few days later, he was rather alarmed to be handed thirty-odd pages of music that would have to be reduced to a simple guide, and performed while wearing a Greek mask and watching a television monitor at the side of the stage

showing Chorus Director Renato Balsadonna providing the alternative lead. Technology can enable such challenges to be met, but again, precious rehearsal time is needed to ensure reliability in every sense.

Both Simon and Keith welcome the new opera and ballet commissions that come on top of the other fine repertory at the Royal Opera House and confirm the author's own experience that these journeys into the unknown can often result in an increased understanding of yourself and your instrument. It is a humbling thought that at many points in times past similar orchestral players would also have sat down at work one day, opened the brand new music on their stands and wondered how they were ever going to play all those notes, especially if the name Wagner appeared at the top of the page. That they did, and generally successfully for thousands of works, has given us the incredible and varied musical legacy we enjoy today.