

## **CAN WE HAVE SOME HONESTY, PLEASE?**

An introduction to some instruments that you probably won't see in the orchestra pit...

by Nigel Bates, Principal Percussion

Deep in the modern dungeons of the Royal Opera House lie many interesting instruments that come under the care of the Orchestra's percussion section. The opera and ballet repertoire often calls upon us to be offstage sound effects artists as much as musicians, and a unique assortment has built up over the years, ranging from a set of sheep's bells (as used in Tosca) through tempered steel plates (as used in Das Rheingold), tuneful wine glasses (as used in La Bohème) to what is thought to be the largest gong in Britain (as used in Turandot). A collection of instruments such as this is of course a very valuable musical asset indeed.

Keen-eyed observers of operatic plots will have noticed that a lot of people die at midnight, gasping their last aria as they fall to the floor, and so it is the percussionist's lot to stand in the wings with the correctly pitched bell waiting to sound the chimes at the appropriate moment. We have a very wide range of bell sounds to draw upon, and can actually set up a mini-peal of real church bells which gives great atmosphere to the big set pieces in Don Carlos and Boris Godunov. Very heavy long tubes made from old London County Council gas piping provide the low cathedral bell sounds needed for the end of Act One of Tosca and there are the shorter higher pitched tubes used at the start of Act Three, where the church bells of Rome chime the early hours as dawn breaks. In Romeo and Juliet, we have a very loud bell to sound the alarm during the first swordfight – the player needing some highly effective ear protection at this point.

Moving away from these many metallic effects, the ROH collection also includes two large bass drums to provide cannon shots (as used in Otello amongst others), a set of four identical military drums (for the marine drummers in Billy Budd), a wind machine, a thunder sheet, various hammers for door-knocking effects, a Hobson's Drum (for Peter Grimes), and a small four-noted xylophone (as used in Madame Butterfly). Special mention must be made of the fonica – one of only two such instruments in the world (the other being at La Scala Milan), which is a sort of mechanical glockenspiel used solely at the end of Act One of La Fanciulla del West. This was left at Covent Garden by the pre-war Italian Opera Company, and was fortunately discovered many years later languishing in the corner of an office.

The most fragile instrument in our collection is perhaps also the simplest. Composer Thomas Adès asked for the sound of rustling leaves in his recent opera *The Tempest* and after some trial and error, the foliage known as "honesty" was found to fit the bill. Inevitably, our nearby orchestral colleagues pointed out that there was "at last some honesty in the percussion section at Covent Garden!"