

RETURNING HOME

THE REOPENING OF THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

by Nigel Bates, Principal Percussion
1999

It certainly seems to be the fashion these days to compile a journal for publication after you leave (or get sacked from) the Royal Opera House. This column is departing from that tradition, and is being written without the benefit of hindsight by Nigel Bates, one of the two Principal Percussionists in the Royal Opera House Orchestra – who are just about to re-enter the Covent Garden building after two-and-a-half years “in the wilderness”.

1st November 1999

(one month to go until the Big Opening Night)

Vilar Floral Hall: The entire ROH orchestra assembles for the official “team photograph”, which is something we haven’t had taken for many years. It’s the first occasion that everyone in the Orchestra has re-assembled in the space of the old ROH since the closure in July 1997 and there’s a renewed sense of belonging to something successful. Group photoshoots such as this seem to take forever, and certain cynics in the Orchestra remark that had this been at a wedding, the guests would have surely starved to death.

The rebuilt Floral Hall is nothing short of spectacular, almost like a mini Crystal Palace, although there’s concern amongst my colleagues as to how all the windows will get cleaned. Across Bow Street, the hideous building which (unbelievably) houses the Design Council is the only thing to spoil the outside view.

Glancing back a month, the Orchestra was involved in a couple of Acoustic Tests in the new Linbury Studio Theatre, which was the first live orchestral music on the Covent Garden site since closure. The Studio Theatre is going to be a real asset for the Orchestra – our own separate rehearsal space within the ROH, taking the place of the Crush Bar which was neither acoustically or physically comfortable. In noticeable contrast to 1997 are smiling faces and – honestly – blank amazement at what has been done with the space.

After the acoustic tests came our final steps (for now) in the world outside – the Britten War Requiem conducted by Bernard Haitink at the Barbican and the Paris Châtelet Theatre. Both performances were very well received which bodes well for our confidence in

the forthcoming opening season. The return of the Eurostar carrying Orchestra and Chorus back to London perhaps holds more "coming home" significance than usual.

And last week, we were all taken round the redeveloped site on "induction sessions", dressed in bright yellow vests, hard-toed boots and hard plastic hats. These sessions are apparently necessary under Health and Safety legislation, and consisted of safety briefings, security briefings, occupational health briefings, personnel briefings, and then a guided tour. Attempting to match up old memories with what is now there is almost impossible, and everyone seems struck by how much daylight comes into the backstage areas. Our new canteen is on the fourth floor, with an outside balcony overlooking the Piazza – a far cry from the airless and lightless basement that went before.

There are pipes, cables of all colours, and air conditioning ducts visible everywhere, and one or two of these will have to be moved so that our `cellists and double bassists don't crack their instruments (or their heads, but the instruments are more valuable, I'm told). Our changing rooms are now ten or fifteen feet under the Orchestral Stalls, and the new pit looks to be substantially more comfortable than the old one. Given that we can spend upwards of six hours a day in that space, this is very good news.

During our closure period, we've had some experience of newly built theatres, and we're all pleased to see that at the ROH it's possible to enter a toilet and to be able to shut the door without having to climb up onto the throne to do so. Theatres elsewhere in London - please do note this subtle enhancement!

By the time this is published, we'll have started rehearsals back in the House proper for all the opening programmes, (including the percussion section's two favourites – Le Grand Macabre and Gawain). And there will be just a few days to go until Opening Night.

2nd November

ENO works (Hoxton)

We're unable to rehearse in the Studio Theatre as planned for this week - there is still building and electrical work taking place and oddly enough fifty or so musicians are thought to be a health and safety risk in those circumstances. Esa-Pekka Salonen arrives complete with Californian suntan, and proceeds to guide us through Ligeti's Le Grand Macabre at a lightening pace, concluding before the scheduled end of the rehearsal. It is of course the Orchestra's favourite musical genre, Early Finnish.

5th November

The Orchestra management moves office from the old tatty Floral Street space across to very pleasant rooms in the new building. I spend a good thirty minutes attempting to find these new offices in the modern catacombs. Various sub-contractors at work on the wiring look surprised and confused at the mention of an Orchestral Office, but a kindly soul eventually leads me to S+2 (or Stage +2) and salvation, when I spot our manager Hazel Province as a distant figure at the end of a corridor. It seems inevitable that complaining musicians seeking redress will wander lost in these corridors in the manner of the Flying Dutchman, which is presumably all part of the master plan.

9th November

In the Linbury Studio Theatre today and tomorrow for rehearsals of the Choreographic Celebration programme. The repertoire for these performances changes every time, and so there's a lot of music to get through. We will also be giving two "preview" performances of this programme – colloquially known as the "hard hat shows", for many of the site workers, staff, Covent Garden residents and so on. These are just two short weeks away.

A fascinating lecture on Wednesday at the National Portrait Gallery, given by Ed Jones and Jeremy Dixon about the whole concept of the ROH redevelopment, which is happening at the same time as their new block for the NPG. They must be busy boys - Jeremy is on crutches following a swimming accident, which really can't make site life very easy.

11th November

A percussion sectional rehearsal today for Gawain, and the first sight of the get-in lift. A complete articulated truck and trailer can drive into this lift, and be raised or lowered to where the load is needed. Pit Managers Steve and Malcolm are delighted by this facility, just so long as the lift doesn't have any more teething troubles.

The post this morning brought two books, one by a man named Isaacs and one by a man named Tooley. Together they make a fascinating insight into "just in time" management and "too late" management, and as a loyal ROH staff member I am not going to say more than that.

14th November

To the seaside today with the Brighton Philharmonic, which actually does not include more than four members of the Covent Garden Orchestra, despite what you may have read in the "letters" column of CM recently. A phone call brings news of major ROH schedule changes for the coming week – stage rehearsal time is getting very tight, and must be prioritised and used efficiently. I suppose so.

A message on the global ROH e-mail system brings good tidings about the first public event in the Studio Theatre – a Nutcracker insight day, which has sent 300 or so people home very happy, with everything from the catering to the toilets functioning as planned. Hopefully a good omen.

18th November

Just five days to go until the first "hard hat" preview, and there's still a lot of clearing up to do. We can but hope that the dust and the detritus will clear in time to reveal the joy and beauty underneath.

Best news of all is that the staff canteen finally opens at lunchtime today, so you may look forward to a review of the Full English Breakfast in the next issue – along with a report from the Opening Night.

19th November

The Full English Breakfast in the canteen doesn't disappoint, but the announced opening and meal times have all the performers in a flat spin. No food at any of the times we can eat. Shock! Horror! Scandal! Within a few hours, the times are adjusted to suit the work of the House, and it's just the price of a cup of tea that now gets discussed.

The view out of the canteen's fourth floor balcony includes the revolving ball on top of ENO's Coliseum, and the suggestion is made that our performances could be laser-projected onto this ball – of course, just to increase public access to our work.

The Orchestra makes a valiant attempt to get into the Pit for a ballet rehearsal this morning, and after a health and safety delay of couple of hours everything is ready. The feel is very different to the old pit, with more space and an acoustically transparent pit rail, and first reports are that the sound has improved. It

certainly feels less "dead", and we'll have to experiment with getting the optimal layout.

20th November

I get lost again in the labyrinth of staircases, lifts and levels. There are several "cores" (sets of stairs and lifts), all with their own helpful colour ranging from a peaceful blue to a very loud orange. The Arcade Core is a painted a bright green, and this is immediately renamed the Apple Core.

The floors number from S for stage level, then go S+1, S+2, S+4 but there's NO S+3. Is it a secret level that only the chosen few have access to? Even development staff can't explain it, and deny any such knowledge. So where can S3 be? I think we should be told.

Some other members of the Orchestra also get lost during the break, and the phrase "I'm just going to the Canteen, I may be some time" is widely heard.

22nd November

The first public performance in the complex – in the Linbury Studio Theatre, and for an audience of schoolchildren, with other children dancing their "Chance to Dance" numbers. Cherie Booth is the guest of honour and a flotilla of journalists and cameras accompany her. On the way home, I notice the Evening Standard billboard: "New Era at ROH". Suddenly we are becoming a success story in the press...

23rd November

Major changes today which I learnt first from a highly placed source (Jim in security) – Le Grand Macabre has been cancelled! A mixture of relief and disappointment all at once, and the organisation's stress level visibly drops. The bottom line is this: if we can't do the rehearsals and performances safely, then something has to give. Tomorrow the press will have something to say (and Norman Lebrecht certainly does, but whenever did he not?). And this is Week 13 of the ROH working year.

Despite a programme change, the two "hard hat" ballet previews (for construction workers, local residents etc) go very well and the audience seems to enjoy what they see. It's a good preparation for the front-of-house staff in dealing with 2268 people. In backstage S+2 I encounter a pair of lost and distressed usherettes desperately seeking the Link /

Box Office (S -1) and hopefully point them in the right direction. I haven't seen them since, though.

27th November

What should have been a frantic few days turn out to be relatively quiet, now that the Big Mac has been cancelled. The planning has been turned inside out, with the newly free stage time re-allocated to other productions. The Orchestra noticeboard is covered with schedule cancellations and changes in varying colours – so that we know what the latest information is. And the House email system has been in meltdown.

The Orchestra is pleased to get into the new changing rooms (now under the Orchestra Stalls) complete with showers, rest rooms, our own lockers and (eventually) shelving for violin and viola cases. When opening the locker, it takes a while to stop the habit of reaching for the deposited pound coin, which has rather been the case for the last thirty months in our temporary homes.

30th November

Just one day to go – and it seems impossible that everything will be ready in time. More scheduling notices along the lines of : "If you were called for the cancelled Nutcracker on November 29th, and the double alone of Gawain on December 7th, then you are now called for the afternoon Alagnas concert rehearsal on the 23rd ". We're going to need a super-computer to work the pay out for this month.

1st December – the Opening Night

It's truly amazing what stimuli of the unmovable deadlines of a performance, royal presence and a live television relay can achieve. A very tiring extended rehearsal of five hours and twenty minutes, which included a power cut below stage, left everyone keyed up, and probably exhausted by 6pm.

In case anything failed, various technical "SWAT" teams were on standby throughout the performance. But it's not an understatement to say that the evening was a triumph for everyone, with a remarkable piece of British musical history being madeand I can reveal that at the post-performance party for performers and audience, the bars did run out of champagne.