

TO BOLDLY GO...

on tour with the ROH Orchestra

by Nigel Bates, Principal Percussion
1999

It's a few minutes after ten o'clock on Friday 5th March, and the Euston-Manchester train pulls into Watford Junction station. About a dozen members of the Royal Opera House Orchestra get on board and join their colleagues who already occupy two of the eight coaches on the train. The Orchestra is on its way to the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester to give a "preview" of one of the two concert programmes that it will be performing on a coast-to-coast tour of the United States over the next three weeks. Joining the Orchestra on the journey are sopranos Judith Howarth and Rita Cullis, tenors Gwyn Hughes Jones and Paul Charles Clarke (who are sharing the tour), baritone William Dazeley, and conductor Sir Edward Downes.

By the time that they all return to British soil, one hundred or so people will have each travelled 520 miles by train, 1390 by coach, and 13,370 by plane, given seventeen concerts in fourteen different concert halls, and stayed in the same number of hotels. The logistics of such an operation are terrifying to the outsider – transport delays, or just one misplaced ticket or passport can spell disaster.

Back at Watford Junction, groans from the Orchestra greet the announcement that the locomotive has broken down and it's necessary to wait for the arrival of a replacement. Not a good start to the trip, everyone is thinking – another three weeks like this would be too much to bear. Forty minutes later, and now being pulled by an engine named Mission Impossible, the journey through the rain and sleet to Manchester continues. The concert is very well received, and after a night at the Piccadilly Hotel the Orchestra boards the (delayed) 9.30 train back to London. Ahead, a frantic weekend of packing and tidying up loose ends – bills to pay, weather forecasts for the East and West US Coasts to examine, and heads scratched over how many shorts or jumpers to take.

Monday 8th March, and the Orchestra settles onto flight BA269 for the eleven hour flight to Los Angeles, and notes through gritted teeth that in-flight entertainment channel 5 features Verdi's *Stiffelio* introduced by "impresario" Sir Jeremy Isaacs. This is the longest day of the tour – with the time difference, it lasts 32 hours. After landing, "arrived safely" phone calls home are made, then it's on to the coaches for the hour-long run down to the Marriott Suites, Costa Mesa, first of the many hotels. Checking into a hotel at the same time as ninety-nine other people is an experience that few would recommend, and indeed

some don't bother with that and head straight for the bar or a nearby restaurant. The lifts become congested, room service grinds to a halt under the strain, and here's a tip for wise travellers – always ask if an Orchestra, Ballet or Opera Company is staying in your hotel, and plan accordingly!

So the Orchestra is now back in California for the first time since the 1984 Olympics Arts Festival visit. There's a "rest" day on Tuesday 9th, but coping with jet-lag will still be difficult over the next few days. The concerts will be given at the equivalent UK time of 4am, and sleep at the appropriate times cannot be guaranteed. To keep awake today, many and varied excursions are planned – hire cars quickly disappear off to Universal Studios, Disneyland, Joshua Tree National Park, and local golf courses. Less energetic people head towards the nearby South Coast Plaza shopping mall, which still feels like walking the length of California when going from Sears in one corner to Macy's in another. Some posh new luggage is observed in the hands of the Delsey Dozen.

Care has to be taken with local custom: during the evening, hotel reception staff eyebrows are raised very high when timpanist Alan Taylor announces loudly that he's "going outside for a fag". Relief is evident when the cigarette is lit. Cinema enthusiast and percussionist Nigel Bates views a new Hollywood release, and enjoys post-film refreshment in the Humphrey Yogart Ice Cream Parlour. Late arrivals bassoonist Martin Field and soprano Judith Howarth crawl in from the airport, wide-eyed from having been in the cockpit on landing and experiencing a air traffic control near-miss.

Wednesday 10th, and the first proper working day of the tour – Concert Programme A this evening, with a full three-hour rehearsal this afternoon. Malcolm Kinch, the Orchestra's Pit Manager (who should really be re-titled Trucking Manager for this tour) is mightily relieved as all the instruments have now safely arrived at the Orange County Performing Arts Center. Only this morning, they were still at the airport awaiting Customs clearance.

The list of items that the Orchestra truck carries is impressive: nearly fifty stringed instruments from violins to double-basses, one contra-bassoon, eight trumpets, five horns, three trombones, two tubas, one cimbasso, four pedal timpani, one bass drum, one glockenspiel, several cymbals and assorted other percussion, one celeste, sixty or so sets of concert dress tails, and three concert dresses each for the two lady singers. Smaller instruments are carried by the players, and it is not unusual to see oboists scraping their reeds in airport lounges, although passengers have yet to be serenaded on a flight or coach journey.

Despite the jet-lag, the concert goes very well and the audience are very appreciative. It's a nice large hall in which to perform – an acoustic which suits the sound of the ROH Orchestra, and there's also somewhere for the singing voices "to go". There are two rotating programmes each celebrating Fifty Years of the Royal Opera on this tour: Programme A consists of the Force of Destiny Overture, excerpts from La Traviata and Der Freischutz, the Rosenkavalier Suite, the Intermezzo from Manon Lescaut, excerpts from La Boheme and Tannhauser, ending up with the Tannhauser Overture in its entirety. There are probably more notes for the strings in this last piece than the rest of the concert put together, and it's a tribute to the players that it sounds as if they've just opened the concert rather than closed it.

Thursday 11th, still in Costa Mesa, and the first Programme B concert. The overture from Oberon, another excerpt from Der Freischutz, excerpts from Faust and Pagliacci, Royal Hunt and Storm from The Trojans, the overture to I Masnadieri, excerpts from Tosca and Don Carlo, ending up with the overture from William Tell. Sadly, the first casualty of the tour – poor Rita Cullis has lost her voice, probably due to the constant temperature and climatic changes brought on by air-conditioning. It's a problem that will beset all the singers throughout the tour, given the unusual working pattern. A quick programme substitution is made – Light Cavalry Overture is put in as an encore. Again – and throughout the trip – the audience is highly appreciative, especially after the final galop of the William Tell Overture which (as Michael Kaiser later explains) is part of every American's genetic or television makeup.

During post-concert refreshment, it's revealed by some players that personal success with the hotel's in-room filter coffee machine has not been achieved in all cases. One gentleman managed to heat up the coffee grounds without the benefit of added water and then encountered a demonstration of a Yellowstone Park geyser when he realised his mistake. Another sadly emptied his hot chocolate powder sachet onto himself and into his suitcase, a problem which took some time to remedy.

Friday 12th March, and the first longish coach ride of 130 miles up to Santa Barbara, some of which goes along through the crowded freeways of Los Angeles. Santa Barbara is a former colonial Spanish town, which is very evident from the architecture. The performing venue is the Arlington Theatre, an older style construction with THE ROYAL ORCHESTRA advertised cinema-style in red lettering outside. Inside though, is the most extraordinary auditorium that the Orchestra will play in on the tour – it resembles the set from Act

One of Carmen. The audience is seated in the town square surrounded on three sides by Spanish-style houses complete with balconies, with the stage taking up the remaining side. Clever lighting gives a night-time sky above, so it feels as if the concert is being given in the open air. Rita is still recovering from her indisposition, so the Cavalleria intermezzo is substituted for one of her arias.

Saturday 13th, and a 9.30 departure from the hotel for the five hour coach journey to Palm Desert. This is the most impressive coach journey that the Orchestra will do on the trip – through the San Bernadino mountains into the Sierra Nevada, and crossing the San Andreas fault. Violinist Christine Hilton and a few other tourist types head quickly off to the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway for a spectacular view across the valley, which is achieved following a rather terrifying vertical ascent in a cable car. The concert takes place – with Rita's voice now gloriously restored - in the Bob Hope Cultural Center, prompting several rather unfair comments about American oxymorons. Backstage, baritone William Dazeley spends his quiet moments telephoning his sister for the English football results.

Sunday 14th, and a very early start for the main adventure party of three percussionists, a violinist, a harpist and a double-bassist: a five-hour drive to Las Vegas, a one-hour flight in a small plane, and then a helicopter ride....to the floor of the Grand Canyon, where a glass of champagne is sipped by the banks of the Colorado River. Meantime, the rest of the Orchestra travel at a more sedate pace to Las Vegas, and the first encounter with Nevada gambling culture takes place as they attempt to check in at the 5000-room MGM Grand Hotel. Slot machines cry out for attention in every corner of this hotel (as indeed they do in virtually every other hotel in Las Vegas) and it's said that this hotel is designed so that guests get lost just looking for their rooms, have to stop by the fruit machines to ask for directions, and presumably then have to have "just one more go".

The Grand Canyon adventure party returns safely and on time, very much to the relief of the tour managers. The concert is being given at the nearby University of Nevada, and William Tell receives its first standing ovation. After the concert, many of the Orchestra hit the Las Vegas Strip – the main drag – which has everything from exploding volcanoes to miniature versions of Venice and Paris landmarks, all to encourage you to go in and gamble your money away. A feature at the MGM Grand is the newly opened drive-through wedding chapel, but no-one from the Royal Opera House is tempted by the facility and there is also no evidence of any huge gambling losses by morning.

One accident mars the otherwise successful day – at the short rehearsal, Mary Mundy’s cello slips from her hand and lands with a dreadful crunch on the stage. The finger board springs off and there is also some damage to the top of the cello body. The instrument is unplayable, and Mary has to sit out the concert. She’s worried about the rest of the tour – but as we will see, help is never far away in this country of 250 million people.

Monday 15th, and a 7am departure for the airport, with the exception of tenor Gwyn Hughes Jones. He finishes his stint on tour today, and returns to Manchester this afternoon. He’s straight back to work with Welsh National Opera – in La Boheme. The rest of the group spend seven hours flying to Atlanta then to West Palm Beach, and another time zone. Having just gotten used to Pacific Standard Time, everyone loses three hours and it’s also dark when they check in to the hotel. The hotel restaurant is the only place open to eat but sadly cannot seem to cope with the large numbers of hungry (and in due course angry) people.

The morning of Tuesday 16th brings sunshine, the first sight of the Atlantic, and the joyous realisation that there’s a private beach a mere twenty feet from the hotel. Inevitably the free morning and afternoon results in some lobster appearances at the evening’s concert. Tenor Paul Charles Clarke arrives for the rest of the tour (and to constantly enliven the first coach with Liverpoolian jocularities), and after a brief rehearsal the immense three-tiered hall resounds to the filling strains of Boheme and Tannhauser. Thanks are due to our colleagues at West Palm Beach Opera for the loan of a ‘cello for Mary Mundy, and a set of timpani – one of the ROH drums successfully ending up in Indianapolis during its cross-continental journey.

A curiosity of many Florida concerts is that not everybody stays for the second half, so it was particularly gratifying for some of the Orchestra to be told during the interval that “We have enjoyed it so much that we’re going to stay for the whole concert.” Fortunately the soloists are not around to hear the next comment, “But do they have to sing so much??”

Wednesday 17th brings the first sighting of the Everglades during the journey to Fort Myers on the opposite coast, which also includes a lunch stop at McDonalds. It’s St Patrick’s Day, and there is much emerald green to be seen everywhere – even Judith Howarth sports an appropriate green top for the concert. The Orchestra meets Mrs Barbara T Mann before and after the performance – she is the amazing driving force behind the existence of the Performing Arts Center that bears her name, and her two sons and their families have underwritten this 50th concert

series in her "love and honour". Mary Mundy is joyfully reunited with her cello, thanks to Rob Beretta from the promoting agents Columbia Artists and his knowledge of a Chinese gentleman in Fort Lauderdale who carries out the difficult repair quickly and efficiently. Rob strenuously denies that all he had to do was to dial 1-800 CELLO-MEND to find him.

A sadness occurs for percussionist Norman Taylor, as his mother died shortly after his arrival in California, and he now leaves the tour to return home for the funeral. A local replacement is found for the Thursday 18th concert in Sarasota with twenty-two hours to spare, and despite continued British sun-tanning efforts this tall gentleman is easily spotted amongst the comparatively white-faced members of the Orchestra.

The venue in Sarasota is the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright which, which has a purple exterior that contrasts dramatically with the setting sun. Inside, this very wide auditorium has distinction of containing the smallest ever stage on which Sadlers Wells Royal Ballet performed their Sleeping Beauty. Two concerts either side of a day off here – and joy of joy, three nights in the same hotel. By now, it gets harder for people to remember their current hotel's room number, so this is a real bonus. Mid-tour washing is done, and more excursions ranging from boat rides, beach watersports, canoeing in the Everglades to a day at the Kennedy Space Center take place.

Sunday 21st and back on the coaches for the 146 mile journey to Orlando, dubbed "the most popular vacation spot on the planet". This of course refers to the proximity of Disneyworld, Universal Studios, Cypress Gardens and a whole host of other theme parks. Not that there's any time for the Orchestra to do much, as the concert starts at 4pm which leaves only moments for a quick lunch and a short rehearsal. Next to the concert hall is the baseball stadium, and it's obvious from the people and the traffic that a match is also taking place this afternoon. A reception is held in the hotel after the concert (a mere 83 feet away according to the Tour Book), and everyone agrees that the profiteroles in white chocolate sauce make an "outstanding contribution" to the welfare of the Orchestra this evening.

220 more coach miles to Fort Lauderdale the following morning of Monday 22nd, with the exception of the entire bassoon section who are off to fly a World War 2 plane at a nearby air museum. Joining the rest of the Orchestra in time for the rehearsal and concert at the Au-Rene Theater, it quickly becomes clear that this is their equivalent of a golfer's "hole in one". For anyone left in the western world who hasn't yet heard the tale,

please write to the Bassoon Section, Royal Opera House Orchestra, if you wish to enjoy their personally narrated video of this activity, complete with leather jackets and goggles.

There's a pleasant diversion during the interval of the concert, where a door from the Orchestra's refreshment room leads out into the audience courtyard, and much Anglo American goodwill is exchanged. A contrast to most venues where the segregation is absolute! The hotel in Fort Lauderdale, right on the Atlantic beach, is also the overnight stop for the concert the following day in Miami. The journey back from Miami is marked by the celebration of violist Lucy Yendole's birthday, though discretion and a fear of reprisal prevents the author from making any further disclosures.

The last week of the tour starts with the arrival (after Dance Bites and a Caribbean holiday) of Orchestra Manager Hazel Province, and so Alison Tedbury bids everyone farewell and returns home early. For the rest of the group, these next days involve the most complicated travelling on the tour – a flight nearly every day, and even less of a safety margin than usual should anything go wrong.

On the last free day of the tour in Fort Lauderdale, it is then that the news reaches everyone (via a fax pushed under all hotel room doors) of the appointment of Antonio Pappano as Musical Director. Many players are initially surprised by the unexpected choice, but violinist Bob Chew doesn't let the concern affect his deep-sea fishing trip, and manages to catch a golden amberjack.

Thursday 25th and today's venue, the State Theater in New Brunswick, is a delightful cosy and original art deco building, is situated in the city center. This contrasts starkly with the Tilles Center on Long Island on Friday 26th, which it seems could not be situated further from civilisation and has the acoustic of a gymnasium! Malcolm Kinch – never knowingly outdone in his quest for food – locates a pizza place hidden behind two locked doors and a concrete wall. Flautist William Morton and 'cellist Tim Hewitt-Jones are now joined by their wives who have come to see what all the fuss is about. They hear all about the tour from violinist Adrian Reed's wife who has been on the whole trip from day one.

Saturday 27th, and the matinee concert slot at the John F Kennedy Center – a massive building which contains a concert hall, an opera theatre and a drama theatre. The performers are bordered each side of the stage by the Stars and Stripes and the flag of Washington D.C. After the concert, coaches take everybody to a reception at the British Embassy

hosted by the ambassador and his wife, Sir Christopher and Lady Catherine Meyer. The Orchestra must be thirsty this evening as the cellars at the Embassy run out of white wine.

It's noticed later this evening that a popular wine on sale in Washington is Monica's Merlot, the slogan of which is that it "goes down a treat". Needless to say, this vintage was not served at the reception.

Sunday 28th and the quickest travel transfer – straight from La Guardia to Avery Fisher Hall, which is part of the Lincoln Centre. The Orchestra of course is familiar with the territory, following the visit of the Royal Ballet and the Royal Opera to the Metropolitan Opera House in 1997. The final Programme A concert is very well received, despite the New Yorker habit of leaving on the dot of the last note, and Michael Kaiser joins the group – no doubt eager to show off his new toy.

An unpleasant surprise awaits Sir Edward and Lady Downes on returning to their hotel room later that evening following a reception – a burst water pipe has drenched their room, and the hotel is attempting to replace their soaked mattress. Not so bad, they think, until they realise that all their packed cases had been left open on the bed awaiting the last few items.....

And finally on the last full day before going home, timpanist Alan Taylor meets his match. For the last ten years at least, Alan has been the longest serving orchestra member anywhere in the UK, having joined the ROH Orchestra in 1951. This is a record of which he is quietly proud – but in New York he encountered his opposite number in the Met Orchestra, Dick Horovitz....who joined in 1946. At a "hands across the sea" ROH/Lincoln Centre drummers gathering before the final concert, it was captivating to watch the combined operatic timpani experience of 101 years being exchanged.

The travel back day sadly turns into something of a nightmare. The very early (05.15) departure from the hotel and the arrival and check-in at JFK airport go fine, but then the system starts to break down, due to actions well beyond the control that of the tour managers. First of all the Orchestra is spread all over the aircraft instead of the much preferred all-in-one-place seating arrangement. Then the lights in the toilets won't work. Then both the visual and audio in-flight entertainment systems stop working. Then the individual reading lights won't work.....it becomes a very, very long journey home.

The author would like to thank the efficiency of ROH Tour Organiser Adam Powell, Orchestra Managers Hazel Province and Alison Tedbury, and Columbia Artists manager Robert Beretta, without whom this article would have certainly contained many more tales of woe and therefore would have been easier to write.