

Wagner Knight

by Nigel Bates

1998

It is a few minutes after five o'clock on a hot summer's afternoon. Inside London's Royal Opera House, the audience quietyens and settles as the house lights fade out, leaving a soft yellow glow emanating from the orchestra pit.

Malcolm Kinch, the pit manager, heaves wide the heavy cast iron door at the back of the pit, says a genial "thank you", and wasting no time Bernard Haitink heads through the ranks of violas, violins and 'cellos towards the Covent Garden podium. Along with the 90 or so members of the Royal Opera House Orchestra, this space will be his temporary home for the next six hours as Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* gets under way.

This is the last opera to be performed in the Royal Opera House before a two-year rebuilding closure commences. It's a tired old lady that hosts these performances and now she wants everyone out so that the technicians and restorers can put back her former glory. Temporary repairs (some lasting over twenty years) have taken their toll. The backstage area has become an unhealthy and sometimes dangerous place to work, and on a daily basis the orchestral musicians have to dodge hanging cables, large parts of scenery and odd looking props - not to mention inhaling the dust and fumes. So it is with a touch of relief as well as sadness that this final operatic moment has been reached.

Sadness particularly for one person by the pit door through which the maestro has just walked. Since 1951, Alan Taylor has been Principal Timpanist in the Orchestra and 46 years later they are virtually pulling the place down around his ears.

This performance marks the final "official" duty for Alan Taylor, although he will continue to play with the Orchestra until there are funds to engage and employ his replacement. He has played *Meistersinger* before, of course - firstly under Sir Thomas Beecham, then also under Rafael Kubelik, Rudolf Kempe, Reginald Goodall, Josef Krips, Clemens Kraus and of course Georg Solti.

Royal Opera House timpani parts (especially in Wagner) are annotated with mysterious hieroglyphics such as "35", "10 to tpt", and "60 safe". To the uninitiated these might seem irrelevant markings, but to Alan Taylor they are vital to his peace of mind - each denotes the length of a "tacet" or non-playing moment. The performer may then slip through the adjacent pit door for a surreptitious cigarette or other

fortification. This system works absolutely fine during performance and major rehearsals, but sometimes the repetition of certain passages during smaller scale rehearsals can mean that Alan is caught on the wrong side of the pit door.

A celebrated exchange between Bernard Haitink and Alan Taylor occurred upon such an occasion when rehearsing the Ring:

BH (having noticed that Alan had been missing)
"Mr Taylor - you are the best timpanist
in London, but also the MOST ELUSIVE!"

ORCH (Laughter)

AT (unfazed, having heard it before)
"Only in London?"

ORCH (Loud laughter)

And so the overture continues with the glorious weaving of several melodies when suddenly all the pit lights go out. Every single one. Quickly, a musician scrambles out of the pit to report this to the stage management, only to find that the power cut is universal - everywhere on stage is also dark.

The Orchestra fades out after fifteen seconds or so. Sometimes they will carry on (as they did during twenty amazing seconds of darkness during *Pelleas* under Abbado) but now there's not much point as the curtain hasn't even gone up.

Emergency power kicks in to the house lights, and the performance is officially suspended. The audience is invited to return to the foyers while the problem is found and rectified: in the basement, a re-development electrical contractor has stopped for a cup of tea and leaned against the main power switch lever - completely unaware of the havoc wrought above.

At 5.30pm the performance re-starts from the beginning of the overture, and it takes a special effort for everyone to re-engage their minds after the concentration has been broken. Worries now abound about the ease of getting home much later than usual - the performance cannot now finish until well after 11pm, and this is not a good hour for public transport in London.

This time the overture thankfully continues without interruption and so does Act One. The "dinner interval" follows where everyone - audience and performers alike - attempts to eat and to be back in their seats within forty-five minutes. Most of the

orchestra eat lightly - indigestion is not something that is at all bearable, given the cramped confines of the pit.

Into Act Two, and after a few bars of triangle, the percussionists have nothing more to do until half-way through Act Three. The job of sorting and packing up fifty years of accumulated drums, cymbals and many other bits and pieces is continued. Some instruments are clearly for the scrap heap, some are destined for "authentic" orchestras, some are being put into storage in Wales, and some are needed for the imminent trip to the New York's Metropolitan Opera House.

Thanks to the re-building works already commenced, there is now only one way for goods and instruments in and out of the ROH. There is a closure Gala Evening in a few days, and the logistics demand that everything that the Orchestra owns has to be removed from the building that night, taken out through this one entrance. The BBC television cameras and all the associated equipment have to be removed from the building that night, also taken out through this one entrance. And it's just been discovered that there is a 1500 piece banquet following the Gala which will be coming in.....through this one entrance. Will the Orchestra end up with a TV camera instead of a tuba, and the BBC attempt to broadcast the snooker with a pair of cymbals?

Part way through Act Two, the astute observer may spot one or two knowing smiles cross the faces of the Orchestra. The three-hour mark has been passed, and the musicians are now earning overtime payments. Although no-one is in British orchestral music employment for the money, any little bonus is of course welcome.

Act Two ends with the riot scene – rather like some recent Royal Opera House meetings – and part of the scenery flies off towards the pit. Fortunately, the safety net covering part of the pit catches the item and so no injury to man or instrument is caused. Before this net was introduced, it was not unusual for all sorts of items to strike musicians – one violinist caught a fake cabbage, one woodwind player was hit by a silver ball, and a dagger once embedded itself in a wooden music stand at the back of the violas. Legend has it that it was nearly forty minutes before either of the viola players noticed anything.....

A much shorter interval now of twenty minutes for quick refreshment – but not too much, as the final act is very nearly two hours long. As the Orchestra returns to the pit, violinists anxiously inspect their strings for signs of disintegration. Woodwind players keep their instruments warm by blowing through them

- cooling can affect the tuning. A pregnant oboist checks the route to the door - just in case. And following the major scene change, clouds of dust from the stage are heading into the pit, making everyone cough and wheeze. It's an open secret that all Royal Opera House germs eventually find their way into the pit.

Act Three is where the hardest work is ever done by an opera orchestra, and like a marathon runner, if musicians haven't paced themselves up until now then all sorts of problems emerge. Symphony and chamber orchestras have long finished their two hour long concerts, and most other repertoire operas would also be finished by now - down the road, English National Opera could have done two performances of La Boheme and still be finished before Covent Garden tonight. It is an impressive sight to observe all the performers still focussed and concentrated.

Behind the scenes at this point, the "late arrivals" enter through what is left of the stage door. Two extra orchestral percussionists, four on-stage drummers, four on-stage trumpeters, and three offstage horn players. Wagner seemed to know of no budget problems or financial restraints, and might be considered to have been a Titanic-producing James Cameron of his day!

The stage players proceed to Wardrobe, where their make-up is applied, wigs and cod-pieces are fitted. The offstage horns proceed to the rendezvous point with their conductor, and become concerned that he is not there. In fact, there's nobody at all. There hasn't been either time or funds for a complete rehearsal run of the opera, and it's been overlooked that the offstage horns were given their entry by principal horn Simon Rayner. Due to personnel changes, he is now playing first horn in the pit - and might as well be on the Moon for all the help he can give to his offstage colleagues.

The concern turns to minor panic, then to major panic - there is no score to hand, and there will be a ghastly silence if the horns do not play! Fortunately a combination of Alan Taylor's musical knowledge passed through the open pit door and the wave of a percussionist's hand restores sanity and the short but vital passage is played perfectly.

And luckily it's noticed that the pass door at pit level, through which the stage trumpets pass to make a very quick change from one side of the stage to the other, is firmly locked. A key is found with seconds to spare, which thankfully prevents an hostage-rescue-style entrance through the door.

It should perhaps be mentioned that all these difficulties are very much the exception. Disruption to

everyone's routine was inevitable with the re-building and the closure, and should Bernard Haitink read this, he might never again wish to conduct *Meistersinger*! Now that would be an operatic tragedy.

And so John Tomlinson as Hans Sachs brings the evening to a close with his declamation to the wonders of Holy German Art. There is relief as well as elation in the pit. Many are totally drained by sheer physical exertion, but no-body leaves the Royal Opera House that night without some sense of achievement. Hopes are also high for the success of the USA and Edinburgh Festival trips in the coming weeks.

Since that time, it is a matter of public record that the fortunes of the Royal Opera House have not been good. All that an orchestra such as the ROH Orchestra seeks is the chance to perform to the highest standard that it can, with administrators endeavouring to facilitate this. Unfortunately, ill-informed decision-making and rather poor management, a succession of cramped and unfinished venues, and punishing tour schedules have stretched its abilities to the very limit. Confidence ebbed away, and at several points it seemed as if the Royal Opera House didn't even want any performers at all.

It's now possible to say that a turning point came on the night of Sunday 20th September 1998. Not in Britain – but in Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, at the Royal Opera's concert performance of *Die Valkyrie* conducted by Bernard Haitink.

Suddenly here was a hall and a place that relished having the Orchestra; an audience that roared like a football crowd, held onto each and every note, and showed that it valued the performance as if it were a rare jewel. The Dutch and later the British press were also ecstatic. And very gently and gradually, the Royal Opera House Orchestra started to believe in itself again.

A personal note:

Compared to Alan Taylor I am a mere junior, having been at the Royal Opera House for just six years. During that time I have been often moved by the reverence which the Orchestra holds for Bernard, and the trust that he continually shows in our own abilities. Bernard truly cares about the welfare of "his" musicians.

The Orchestra has been delighted to share in several of Bernard's birthdays since he came to Covent Garden – sometimes with a performance, sometimes a

rehearsal, and sadly one when he attended the funeral of Iain Prestage, a `cellist with the Orchestra.

The Royal Opera House is now being run a new Executive Director, Michael Kaiser. Bernard's intended resignation has been withdrawn, increased private and government funding has been secured, amongst other positive developments. It's safe to say that the Covent Garden future looks much more exciting than anyone might have thought possible.

To Bernard, from all of us at the Royal Opera House –
Our very best wishes for a Happy 70th Birthday!

Nigel Bates is one of the two Principal Percussionists with the Royal Opera House Orchestra, having previously been a freelance player with all of the London orchestras. In addition to music, his other interests include technology, writing, history and film production.
