

TRIP TO ALDEBURGH, MAY 2011

My first extended trip with the Music Club was a delightful Wagner weekend in Aldeburgh programmed by The Mastersingers and beautifully organised by Rosemary Frischer, who most gracefully and graciously coped with many problems, most particularly the mystery of the suitcase which was put on the coach in London but had disappeared by the time it reached its destination.

Musically and culturally the weekend was most varied and successful – a splendidly full calendar starting with an excellent recital on the first evening by bass-baritone James Rutherford, taking a break from Hans Sachs at Bayreuth, who also treated us to some of his ‘Wotan in progress’ (not long, I suspect, before he gets to put that role on the big world stages).

The next morning the eloquent David Edwards introduced a lecture/recital which included extracts from *Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Tristan und Isolde*. After a short break came one of the highlights of the weekend – Anne Evans giving a master class on Waltraute’s visit to Brünnhilde’s rock (Act I, *Götterdämmerung*) to two young ladies with wonderfully large voices – soprano Rachell Nicholls and mezzo Magdalen Ashman, excellently accompanied by Julian Black on the piano.

After the first of several delicious lunches at the White Lion it was back to the Jubilee Hall for a fascinating introduction to *Die Walküre* by David Edwards, after which, in the Aldeburgh Cinema, came the live broadcast of the opera from the New York Met. Some people left after Acts I and II. I stayed to the end, but thought the staging of the third act was the least successful. Robert Lepage’s inexplicably expensive, inappropriate and unnecessary stage machinery wobbled about as it was apparently supposed to do, but mercifully one couldn’t hear the groaning and squeaking so criticised by reviewers in the opera house itself, nor could we hear its irritating ‘beeping’ other than in the backstage interviews conducted by Plácido Domingo.

Musically, the performances were very fine. I especially enjoyed Jonas Kaufman, who looks the perfect Siegmund and who sounded much stronger on the broadcast than he had done to reviewers in the auditorium. Levine’s conducting is not his most spirited now but the Met Opera Orchestra certainly played magnificently and Bryn Terfel sang extremely well as Wotan. It is only when one compares this production/performance to the many others one has heard in the past that it all comes up significantly short. Surely the more traditionally ‘realistic’ previous Met production was far superior to this new one; and this ‘modern’ interpretation does not come anywhere near that of, for example, Patrice Chereau at Bayreuth.

The next day started with a most interesting interview of Sir John Tooley by Humphrey Burton about Sidney Nolan’s artistic friendship with Benjamin Britten, after which Malcolm Rivers gave a vivid presentation of some of Britten’s *Children’s Crusade*. After the coffee break Kelvin Lim, the official pianist for the weekend, gave forceful and virtuosic renditions of three of Liszt’s pounding versions of Wagner extracts (‘too many notes’ for me!).

In the afternoon came the other highlight of the weekend – a recent fascinating documentary by Tony Palmer of interviews with some of the many surviving relatives of the Wagner clan. Palmer’s introduction and subsequent discussion was most amusing and authoritative; his knowledge of this intriguing and complex subject must be one of the most comprehensive in the world.

The evening concert evening was, for me, the least successful segment of the weekend, the theme of which was ‘Life as an Exile’, but it was stretched too thinly in this long recital. And sadly, considering the musical sophistication of the audience, some of the performers were just not good enough. The evening concluded with the scena between David and Sachs from Act III of *Die Meistersinger* which leads up to the ‘Wahn’ monologue, nicely sung by James Rutherford, but it seemed to have nothing whatsoever to do with the title of the concert; and even Humphrey Burton, who had been giving most amusing anecdotal and authoritative introductions to the programme, did not attempt to make any such link.

Happily, I had time to visit the lovely Aldeburgh church to view the Piper window and pay obeisance at the surprisingly austere grave of Benjamin Britten. My visit to the library of the Red House was interesting

for the exhibition of some Nolan paintings – and particularly that I was able to read the Nolan/Britten outline script for an aboriginal ballet entitled Initiation, but I quite understood why it was never completed and performed, since its climax was that of a graphic male circumcision! Unfortunately, we were not allowed into the Red House itself, where the exhibition of ‘Britten at Work’ does not open until next month.

The coach returned to London with a break for another delicious lunch at Snape, but sadly we were not allowed in for a tour of The Maltings.

Meeting a large group of about ninety people was rather frustrating for someone like me who cannot ever remember anyone’s name (name tags would have been helpful); but I am looking forward to making another similar trip and becoming acquainted with more of the fascinating and diverse people in this excellent Club.

Robert Mansell

Kelvin Lim and James Rutherford, Aldeburgh, May 2011
(Photograph courtesy of Peter West, donningtonart@aol.com)