

A HAPPY EVENING WITH SIR JOHN

A capacity crowd of Music Club members and friends filled 49 Queen's Gate Terrace in March for a wonderful evening featuring renowned bass baritone Sir John Tomlinson. Just finishing a remarkable run as Gurnemanz in the ENO's acclaimed production of *Parsifal*, it was fitting that Sir John was introduced by the ENO Chairman Sir Vernon Ellis. Our own congenial Chairman Michael Bousfield then took on the challenging task of discussing Sir John's fascinating life and career, accompanied by appropriate musical illustrations.

A Lancastrian, born and bred in Oswaldtwistle, SJT cannot remember when he did not sing, from primary school to chapel, from there to the Royal Manchester College of Music and on to a career which spans the world's major opera houses from the Met to Bayreuth. His musical illustrations touched on many aspects of his distinguished career, ranging from Handel ('Why do the Nations so Furiously Rage Together?') to Harrison Birtwistle (the famous singing head from *Gawain*), and taking in constabulary duty from the *Pirates of Penzance* en route. Verdi, Bartok, Mozart and Benjamin Britten all sounded forth from Brian Dodsworth's immaculately handled Bose, and we all wanted more from this 'Desert Island Discs' medley. The evening was far too short!

But it is for Wagner that Sir John is especially celebrated. His Bayreuth appearances cover 18 consecutive seasons, roles including Wotan, King Marke, Titurel, Gurnemanz, Hagen and the Dutchman. Nearer to home, his Hans Sachs in the Graham Vick *Meistersinger* at Covent Garden will continue to be fondly remembered – and Sir John will sing Pogner in the forthcoming 2011/2012 ROH revival. In discussion, it transpired that two of his main roles are especially demanding: Gurnemanz is on stage continuously for the 1¾ hour First Act of *Parsifal* – but Hans Sachs has no less than 2½ hours singing in this major test of both musicianship and stamina – of which Sir John has both in spades!

Naturally Wagner featured prominently in the evening's music, with Hagen's Watch coupled with Siegfried Act 3 delighting the audience. I also found it personally intriguing to listen to his 'Catalogue Aria' from *Don Giovanni*; never have I heard Mozart sound so Wagnerian! It is no accident that Sir John's Wagner seems to tower over his other roles, but *Bluebeard's Castle* and Pizzetti's *Murder in the Cathedral* both feature in his 2011 repertory, along with concert appearances with the Philharmonia. And a glance at his discography shows around 30 composers who have been given the 'Tomlinson Treatment', to widespread appreciation.

As always, the evening ended with a series of lively questions from the floor, expertly steered by our affable Chairman, with appropriate and witty responses from our guest of honour. Thanks to Sir John for a truly delightful evening!

Don Moore