

MUSIC CLUB VISIT TO KENSAL GREEN CEMETERY

Back from the Wexford Festival - great as usual - overnight bus (12 hours), sleepy and unprepared for this Music Club date on 31 October. In a cemetery? Trains and buses – usual weekend chaos. How to get there? I'm glad I made the effort. The Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery put on an excellent show for their 14 guests - elegant and informative, with well-prepared notes by Henry Vivian-Neal, the tour itself being led by John.

The Cemetery confronts one with a great sea of broken masonry, some graves neglected and forgotten, some primly attended, and a great confusion of different architectural styles; some leaning at drunken angles, a forlorn fringe of modern burials clinging to the edge near the retaining wall.

The first item was the catacomb beneath the Anglican Chapel, where some very famous people are interred, for example the great 19th century English actor, William Macready, with its neat shelving, decaying coffins, dust and peeling plaster, rusting latticed metal fronts, indecipherable labels, chill and gloom. I thought of poor Juliet and her apprehensions about waking before the time of rescue, or Edgardo and the sombre announcement of Lucia's death. Then, back into the light and a welcome cup of tea.

There are some celebrated singers and composers buried here, including Catherine Hayes, whose dilapidated tomb has been beautifully restored. In the mid 19th century her fame was nearly equal to that of Jenny Lind, but she has been largely forgotten since. Maggie Teyte, Frederick Lablache, John Braham, George Grossmith, Therese Tietjens are a few singers that we might know. The composers Balfe, Wallace and Benedict were particular exponents of an English/Irish operatic style, considered to be outdated and rather "creaky", but recent recordings of some show otherwise.

Recent burials are those of Harold Pinter and Maria Bjornson, a poignant reminder of her untimely death. She was a gifted designer, remembered for a difficult production of *The Sleeping Beauty* at Covent Garden, but also a most enduring production of *The Phantom of the Opera* - a great loss.

Landon Ronald, conductor, is here, too, famous for his enterprise (with Fred Gaisberg) in taking recording equipment to Adelina Patti's castle retreat in Wales and capturing her voice for posterity.

The Friends' excellent magazine is devoted to articles about the Irish soprano Catherine Hayes, and it is interesting to note that the recent revival of Donizetti's *Linda de Chamonix* at Covent Garden is the first time it has appeared there since Hayes sang it in 1849.

Overwhelmed by all of this, we made a reluctant departure at five o'clock.

Our thanks to the friendly people there, whose expertise made it possible to experience the great interest of this place, and also to our indefatigable Rosemary.

Keith Larsen