

“From Disaster to Triumph”

A selection of British operas composed during the reign of HM Queen Elizabeth II up to the time of her Diamond Jubilee¹

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A sincere tribute to all to all those many composers who have spent vast amounts of their time writing operas – whether successfully or not – and who have contributed to the overall status of that Great Art as seen in the British Isles today.

IT BEGAN WITH A FIASCO! In 1953, with the Coronation of HM Queen Elizabeth II, the nation put on a spectacular and emotionally charged ceremony that went back at least to King William I in 1066, and to a degree to King Egbert of Wessex in 802 and to King Kenneth McAlpin in Scotland in 874. To match this occasion, the musical establishment commissioned Benjamin Britten to write an opera for a Royal Gala performance at Covent Garden. It was and is true that Britten was our leading opera composer at the time, with *Peter Grimes*, *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Albert Herring* and *Billy Budd*, his main operas to date, behind him. So an opera about Queen Elizabeth I, *Gloriana*, seemed logical in that context.

In his obituary of the Earl of Harewood in *Opera* magazine, Rodney Milnes tells us that Lord Harewood, the Queen's first cousin, was “*at the centre of arrangements surrounding the commissioning and premiere of Gloriana ...*”. This is odd considering the disaster that followed. Unfortunately the “*great and the good*” invited as the audience to Covent Garden mostly had no idea what a Britten opera sounded like. By all accounts they were expecting something like an updating of Edward German's *Merrie England*, which was being performed widely round the country in the open air (mostly in the rain). Communication between Buckingham Palace and Covent Garden must have been suspect. For, surely, nobody who mattered in the Royal Household (which did not include Lord Harewood) had actually seen a Britten opera. The libretto had been submitted to the Palace only a very short while before, possibly too late to do anything about it, although it is understood that the Duke of Edinburgh read it. Additionally the opera establishment plainly was unaware of the negligible musical knowledge of a potential upper crust audience. To many of them Britten sounded horribly modern, indeed incomprehensible.

Although a few “popular” pieces or episodes were deliberately placed in the opera, for example the *Choral Dances* and the Norwich scene in general, one must wonder what the Queen was told about the content of *Gloriana*. No wonder she was not amused to see her illustrious and heroic predecessor depicted as an old woman, at her very worst, infatuated by a young tear-away, the Earl of Essex, whom she is persuaded to have

¹ The views and opinions expressed on the merits (or otherwise) of the operas and other works by composers mentioned in this article are solely those of the author and should not be taken as representing the *British Music Society* in any way.

beheaded. Indeed the moment when Essex bursts into her bed chamber and discovers her half dressed and without her wig – though wonderful “theatre” – could have sent shock waves throughout the opera house. With hindsight, regardless of the problems, on discovering what *Gloriana* was really like, a quick change to a short run gala of *Merrie England* would have suited the bill admirably, with nothing taxing for an audience unaware about what contemporary opera was like; and with a modest appearance of *Gloriana* at Sadler’s Wells a little later before an audience that understood Britten’s operas.

This abject failure gave the popular press a field day to attack “arty-farty” music, and opera in particular. Only a couple of years before, the *Festival of Britain* had sponsored an opera competition but none of the winners had yet to be performed and Vaughan Williams long awaited *Pilgrim’s Progress* had been derided by the critics. Opera is an easy target, and *Gloriana* was gleefully seized upon to demonstrate how hopeless we British were at it. The tragedy is that British composed opera during the 60 years of Queen Elizabeth’s reign has – on balance – been a success story, has given much pleasure to many, many lovers of musical theatre and has established Britain as one of the front runners in the field of contemporary opera.

Let us now consider the composers who have written operas successfully since 1952. Their output makes for a formidable repertory but it cannot be 100% inclusive – I have only included operas actually seen in person (except where stated). Plainly therefore this article must to a degree be a personalised affair and will inevitably be opinionated. This is in the nature of opera buffs! I attended opera regularly from 1956 until 2010 when I could no longer travel to London. For new works since then, I have relied on that “Bible” of opera reviews, *Opera* magazine.

Selection 1 – “The Old Brigade”

At the time of the coronation, many of the pre-Britten and pre-Tippett generation of composers had written their last operas (Eugene Goossens, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Arthur Bliss, George Lloyd)) and had received scant support from the press or public. Indeed in two instances they had to suffer misconceived and uncomprehending productions. However three continued to write operas with some modest success – Benjamin, Berkeley and Walton.

Arthur Benjamin (1893-1960)

A Tale of Two Cities 1957 Romantic Melodrama in 6 scenes; Words Cedric Cliffe after Charles Dickens; New Opera Co at Sadler’s Wells

Australian-born Benjamin’s opera was well considered when it first appeared with a quite splendid cast. I was abroad so did not see it but judging from a BBC broadcast performance, such complimentary comment was sound – a *scena* sung by Amy Schuard was riveting. Indeed the soloists had plenty of scope to shine and the choral work sounds excellent. In fact Dickens dramatic novel comes out of it well and its neglect seems quite irrational.

Lennox Berkeley (1903-1989)

A Dinner Engagement 1954 Opera in 2 scenes (half bill); Words Paul Dehn; English Opera Group at Aldeburgh

Nelson 1954. Opera in 3 Acts; Words Ian Pryce-Jones; Sadler’s Wells Opera

A Dinner Engagement is a delightfully amusing thumbnail sketch set in post-war “Stafford Crippsian” austerity London. A duchess has many problems, including a

servant problem, that need solving before her guests arrive. Logically this kind of dated comedy would have been abandoned years ago. However it manages to capture the spirit of the times with great success, and somehow manages to improve itself with every showing.

Yet Berkeley was not a natural-born composer of opera, though given the right script (as with his one act piece above) he could shine. *Nelson* has some weak scripting and tends sometimes to follow conventional operatic practice that does not suit it. The music is uneven and has no big tune for the lovers (Nelson and Emma Hamilton). But equally, it has some fine moments including the death of Nelson; a fine *scena* for Lady Hamilton and a stirring quarrel with Lady Nelson. This opera would suit a special revival on a big naval or nautical occasion, possibly semi-staged in the open-air at Portsmouth in front of *HMS Victory*.

William Walton (1902-1983)

Troilus and Cressida 1954 3 Acts; Words Christopher Hassall after Chaucer; Covent Garden Opera

The Bear 1967 1 Act Extravaganza (half bill); Words Paul Dehn after Chekhov; English Opera Group at Aldeburgh

Troilus and Cressida is a major romantic opera that has divided critical opinion for fifty years. Staged at Covent Garden, it never quite “clicked”. There were several revisions – that by Opera North in 1995 was particularly well reviewed and in the opinions of many of us earned its place in the repertoire. Set in Troy, Troilus is one of the sons of King Priam. He falls for Cressida, the daughter of the High Priest (and traitor) Calchas. The ramifications are a mixture of politics and expediency. Cressida ends up a captive in the Greek camp. Both Troilus and Cressida die during an attempt at negotiation.

The opera improves as it progresses, ending with a really fine third Act. There is a marvellous piece of descriptive writing at the beginning of Act 3 (influenced by the Italian landscape) and throughout the characterisation of the half dozen or so main participants is positive. However probably overtaking Opera North’s sound efforts, a new performing edition at St Louis (USA) in 2008, may well have really “cracked it”. *Opera* magazine (John Allison) enthused and declared “*it should be brought home*”. We await such an initiative with both expectation and some frustration.

However by sheer coincidence, the person who actually reduced the orchestration for St Louis was none other than the BMS chairman, John Gibbons. As the *Dallas Morning News* (Scott Cantrell) put it: “... *this will be hard to outdo as the operatic revelation of the year...Nothing about John Gibbons’s reduced orchestration left one wanting more*”.

The Bear is a comedy that seems to improve on every showing. It may not be easy to do, but is rewarding to those who really grasp its finesse.

Selection 2 – “The Main Stream”

There was a time when Britten was a dominating figure in British music, let alone in opera and on Britten’s early death, it was Tippett who took over the mantle. In fact they were both very much admired amongst opera buffs.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Gloriana 1953 Opera in 3 Acts; Words William Plomer; Covent Garden Opera

The Turn of the Screw 1954 Opera in Prologue & 2 Acts; Words Myfanwy Piper after Henry James; English Opera Group at La Fenice, Venice

A Midsummer Night's Dream 1960 Opera in 3 Acts; Words the composer & Peter Pears after Shakespeare; English Opera Group at Aldeburgh;

Owen Wingrave 1971 Opera in 2 Acts; Words Myfanwy Piper after Henry James; BBC TV

Death in Venice 1973 2 Acts (17 scenes); Words Myfanwy Piper after Thomas Mann; English Opera Group at Snape

As many will recall, *Gloriana* – within only a dozen years of the original debacle – had established itself as a work for the repertory. With a South Bank concert performance initially to test the water; then there followed a fine production at Sadlers' Wells Opera, with a few revisions, which was taken successfully to Munich (with Sullivan's *Iolanthe*) for the Olympics. Another excellent production by Opera North came out only a relatively short while back.

Britten continued to write very fine operas, with perhaps *Owen Wingrave* the weakest (but still better than most operas by other composers, and better on stage than seen on TV). Inevitably it was compared unfavourably with *The Turn of the Screw*, with which superficially it shares certain traits. He also wrote church chamber “operas” and children’s operas that may wear a bit thin (a personal view) and could well disappear. Recently, in an editorial, *Opera* magazine (John Allison) pointed out the great number of Britten operas being produced worldwide – something unique in British opera.

The Turn of the Screw, a really frightening ghost story that some consider to be his best opera, let alone his best chamber opera; and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a charming and amusing setting of Shakespeare, are destined to last for many years to come. In a changing world, *Death in Venice*, with the principle shown as a homosexual, is also likely to be staged for many years – providing the cast is carefully chosen.

Michael Tippett (1905-1998)

The Midsummer Marriage 1955 Opera in 3 Acts; Words the composer; Covent Garden Opera

King Priam 1962 Opera in 2 Acts; Words the composer after Homer; Covent Garden Opera at Coventry Cathedral

New Year 1989 Opera in 3 Acts; Words the composer; Wortham Theater Center, Houston, Texas. USA

Opera magazine, in the editorial already mentioned, noted the lack of Tippett performances currently. Two of his operas, not listed above, are probably destined for oblivion, on account of Tippett's pretentious, engineered and “too clever by half” libretti (to wit *The Knot Garden* and *The Ice Break*) despite some fine music.

Though a little long, *The Midsummer Marriage* contains a wealth of glorious music, including the *Ritual Dances*. Influenced by *Die Zauberflöte*, with its trials of two people attempting to reach (Masonic) heights – the plot is a trifle strange but one soon accepts it as “normal” – and as an opera it really is very enjoyable, thought provoking and unlike other operas written at the time. Most critics, though admiring the music, were quite lost when it came to the philosophy and understanding of the plot.

On the other hand, *King Priam* is easy to understand, being based on Homer's Iliad. As with Monteverdi's great work, *The Return of Ulysses (Odysseus) to his Fatherland*, Tippett involves the Greek Gods in the action, and particularly Hermes, who dashes between King Priam and Achilles in his tent. The three goddesses, Aphrodite, Hera and Athena are shown as the alter egos of the three Trojan women, Helen, Hecuba and Andromache,

a clever and effective ruse. As for the war cry of Achilles on the death of Patroclus, the first time I heard and saw it (the great Richard Lewis) remains with me as a haunting memory. This great opera must survive.

Tippett's final opera, *New Year*, is another one influenced by *Die Zauberflöte* and also by *Fidelio*. The principle participants have the option of finding sanctuary in "Nowhere Tomorrow" or the cruel reality of "Terror Town" (Urban USA). There are futuristic computers and spacecraft galore. It all takes a bit of swallowing but I shall give it the benefit of the doubt – the sheer imagination and humanity of it marks it for a future.

Selection 3 – “Sixties Hopesfuls”

In the sixties and early seventies, there was an aura of optimism for British opera in the upper echelons of our opera houses – and not only because of Britten and Tippett. A new era of opera composers arrived and often flourished. In the lead was Malcolm Williamson with Nicholas Maw and (in **Selection 10**) Gordon Crosse and Richard Rodney Bennett.

Malcolm Williamson (1931-2003)

Our Man in Havana 1963 Opera in 3 Acts; Words Sidney Gilliat after Graham Greene; Rostrum at Sadlers' Wells

English Eccentrics 1964 Opera in 2 Acts; Words Geoffrey Dunn after Edith Sitwell; English Opera Group at Aldeburgh

The Happy Prince 1965 Children's Opera in 1 Act; Words the composer after Oscar Wilde; Ad Hoc, Farnham (Surrey)

The Violins of St Jacques 1966 Opera in prologue & 3 Acts; Words William Chappell after Patrick Leigh Fermor; Sadler's' Wells Opera

The Australian Williamson, who spent much of his life over here in the UK, and even became *Master of the Queen's Music*, is currently strongly out of favour. The reasons are mainly personal rather than musical. However, for some three or four years he was the hero of the world of British opera and wrote some excellent works – as already listed. They were above all tuneful at a time when 12-note atonal music was tending to dominate our musical life. Then during this latter time, his ability to press the right buttons tended to decline to a significant degree, But these four works certainly need remembering and, indeed, performing.

The Happy Prince is an enchanting piece for children of all ages (from 8 to 80 plus). It can be staged with one of Williamson's lesser One Acters (not listed) i.e. *Dunstan and the Devil* or *Julius Caesar Jones*. *English Eccentrics* is a unique cabaret-style work, with a dozen or so cameos of odd historical figures from Princess Caribou to Beau Brummell. Most of it is very enjoyable.

Some, indeed many, consider *The Violins of St Jacques* to be Williamson's best opera and it certainly is a good one, with his usual use of exotic percussion as befits its oceanic setting and its devastating volcanic eruption. It tends however to lack some spontaneity in the lighter characters and in the comedy episodes.

Personally my own favourite remains *Our Man in Havana*, a marvellous mixture of comedy and tragedy, laced with truly wonderful melodies, with influences from Elizabeth Lutyens and the 12-tone brigade through to Richard Rogers. Its broad comedy linked with personal tragedy makes its lack of a professional revival inexplicable. (It must be noted, however, that several critics did not rate it).

It is to be hoped that with his centenary looming ahead in 2013, Williamson's operas will be revived (if not before) and the "Great British Public" will realise how good they are.

Nicholas Maw (1935-2009)

One Man Show 1964 Opera in 2 Acts revised in 1966 & 1970 (reduced to 1 Act); Words Arthur Jacobs; London County Council at the Jeannetta Cochrane Theatre, London

The Rising of the Moon 1970 Opera in 3 Acts; Words Beverley Cross; Glyndebourne Festival

Sophie's Choice 2003 Opera in 4 Acts; Words the composer after William Styron; Royal Opera

Maw's *One Man Show*, is a comedy that "takes the Mick" out of the art critics – and with some justification. The Protagonist, when inebriated, has a tattoo made on his body that the Arts establishment considers to be a masterpiece. This creates a problem over its exhibition. The resolution of this conundrum is what the opera is about. It was a little too long for its content and was reduced to 1 Act. It is now at an acceptable length and remains very amusing.

His next comedy, though somewhat over orchestrated, was *The Rising of the Moon*, set in 19th century Ireland, where an English regiment is billeted. A new subaltern is set initiation tests that include his capacity to drink, smoke and bed both the officer's wives and the local colleens. However there is more to the opera than that, with a priest who demands that British troops leave Ireland and other complications. For a while this made it difficult to stage, but now there is, hopefully, less political reason why this delightful work should not be performed again – particularly with the reduced orchestral arrangement used effectively at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

Sophie's Choice is one of those peculiarly British tragedies – there was a good deal of "spin" about it before the first night. It lasted for 4 hours – and seemed too long for its own good (worries about last trains were understandable). This was the cue for critics to damn it as a "Failure" – which quite palpably it was not. Yes – at the time it seemed to need cutting by about 30 minutes. However the issue of a DVD by the Royal Opera indicates that the original length is probably justified, though some patience is required occasionally – a requirement not unknown in opera. The setting of the opera is divided between New York in 1947 and flash-backs to Poland in 1943. Sophie is a Polish refugee and her relations with Nathan, a Northern, and Jewish paranoid schizophrenic and with Stilgo, a sound Southern novelist are key to much of the work. This New York aspect works out slowly though with some good "theatre" and with Stilgo writing his novel based on Sophie's Polish experiences. It is all recalled by a Narrator, a key figure, who is the alter ego of Stilgo, who in turn is the near-autobiographical representative of the novelist, William Styron. In Poland, in flashback, Sophie, a Catholic, faced with the Nazis, refuses the offer to place her children in the *Lebensborn* programme which would have guaranteed them security. So bound for Auschwitz (a punishment for some minor food theft), there is a shocking scene in a cattle truck and later when she is faced with the choice of saving one of her two children – the removal of the screaming girl is as harrowing as anything I have witnessed in opera.

The critics were wrong about *The Pilgrim's Progress*, about *A Midsummer Marriage*, largely about *Our Man In Havana* and, most surely, wrong about *Sophie's Choice*.

Selection 4 – “*The Manchester Explosion*”

Arriving near-simultaneously with the Sixties Hopefuls came three composers from the Royal Manchester College of Music (now the Royal Northern College of Music) that changed British opera forever. To this day, some, in fact many, find much of their concert hall music impossible. It is certainly difficult, but their operas – and opera is a combination of music, words and “theatre” – are usually well attended and received with enthusiasm.

Harrison Birtwistle (b, 1934)

Punch and Judy 1968; Words Stephen Pruslin; English Opera Group at Aldeburgh

The Mark of Orpheus 1986 Parados, 3 Acts, Exodos; Words Peter Zinovieff; English National Opera at the London Coliseum

Yan Tan Tethera 1986 Opera in 1 Act; Words Tony Harrison; Opera Factory at the Queen Elizabeth Hall

Gawain 1991 Opera in 2 Acts; Words David Harsent after *Gawain and the Green Knight*; Royal Opera

The Last Supper 2000 Dramatic Tableaux in 2 Parts; Words Robin Blaser; Glyndebourne Festival

The Minotaur 2008 Opera in 2 parts; Words David Harsent; Royal Opera

Birtwistle first hit the headlines and sent out shockwaves with *Punch and Judy*. It seems less pungent now but is likely to reappear from time to time mainly for historical interest. His two companion shorties, *Under the Greenwood Side* and (with much regret the very good) *Bow Down* are likely to be sidelined by his great later works. Similarly *The Second Mrs Kong* and *The 10 Passion* will probably be passed over in due course except as novelties – though the former is very amusing and made a big impact initially on topical grounds; and the latter certainly has its moments – Zeus disguises himself as a bull, transforms Io into a heifer and mounts her. Both operas are fairly accessible.

All Birtwistle's operas are based on myth or legend and this is a strong theme that pervades throughout his operatic output. In my view these next five works are masterpieces, with differing scopes for musical presentation. For example *Yan Tan Tethera* and *The Last Supper* share a small-scale orchestral sound that is really quite beautiful. *The Mask of Orpheus*, on the other hand, requires two conductors to control both traditional and electronic sound and machinery.

Yan Tan Tethera is, I think, actually the easiest of his operas to assimilate. The story of a northern shepherd who comes down to Salisbury Plain and meets hostility is easy to follow. In fact it is as much of a landscape opera as a character opera. In it Birtwistle digs deeply into one's basic fundamental feelings about pre-Saxon England, and is incredibly inspired about our primeval roots.

Mentally and philosophically both *The Last Supper* and *The Mask of Orpheus* are taxing: with a recapitulation and re-telling of Christ's dealings with his disciples in modern times in one case; while the Orpheus legend is explored relentlessly in various guises in the other. Both are marvellous. In *The Last Supper* large scale theological questions arise. Did Judas Iscariot betray Christ? Or was he betrayed by the Church in the intervening 2000 years? “*The Holocaust shattered my heart*” Christ says. “*Hell is here*” states Iscariot later. Birtwistle recognises that the words are vital to the argument and deliberately gives his music almost a supporting role. This must have been a difficult

decision to make. As it is, he uses no violins, makes much use of "low" brass and woodwind, a large percussion section and an accordion.

The Mask of Orpheus on the other hand is utterly complex both musically and in plot – would that ENO could afford to revive it. During the course of its three Acts, by use of two singers and one dancer for each main character, every conceivable aspect of the Orpheus legend is examined. It is complex, taxing – and terrific. Because, when actually being rehearsed, its length was seen to be a good deal longer than the ENO planned, heavy cutting had to be made in Act II. So we have yet to see the full opera. What an exciting day that will be!

Gawain is traditional fare for anybody. The story line is plain, well known and the moment when the Green Knight spares Gawain has a near-spiritual quality. The main controversy is a 20 minute orchestral ritual called "*The Turning of the Seasons*", depicting the twelvemonths before Gawain must renew his challenge to the Knight. Yes, it is long and it was reduced in length considerably when the opera was revived. However, on further reflection, though the final answer could go either way the present writer himself preferred the original but then time-wise he has been Wagner-trained!

Finally to *The Minotaur*. One has heard professional opinions that the music for this work is disappointing. As a concession it must be admitted that some of it is like a backcloth to the incidents and action as with the best of film music. Otherwise, frankly, the Great British Public does not give a fig as long as it works. As far as they are concerned, *The Minotaur* is a marvellous illustration of a remarkable mythical tale – in short it is tremendous "theatre" – sometimes frightening, even shocking – and so it should be. The scenes when the Bull-cum-Man rapes and murders his victims are given grim realism. The fight with Theseus and the beast's death are also memorable, as is the plight of poor, ensnared Ariadne.

Birtwistle spreads his canvas wide and brightly amongst his chosen tales of myth, mystery, drama and intellectual curiosity – would that the international world of opera would stage him more. One reckons the USA should be beckoning for his "five" as an antidote to minimalism.

Peter Maxwell Davies (b, 1934)

Eight Songs for a Mad King 1969 Music theatre (short); Words Randolph Stow; Pierrot Players at Kirkwall

Taverner 1972 2 Acts; Words the composer after 16th Century documents; Covent Garden

Miss Donnellythorne's Maggot 1974 Music Theatre in 1 Act; Words Randolph Stowe; Adelaide, Australia

The Martyrdom of St Magnus 1977 1 Act (full bill); Words the composer after M. Brown; Fires of London at Kirkwall

The Lighthouse 1980 Prologue & 1 Act (full bill); Words the composer; Fires of London at Edinburgh

Resurrection 1987 Prologue & 1 Act; Words the composer; Darmstadt

Cinderella 1994 Opera-Pantomime for children; Welsh National Opera at Oxford

The Doctor of Myddfai 1997 Opera in 2 Acts; Words David Pountney; Welsh National Opera. Kings Theatre Cardiff

The Medium 2000 1 Act; Words the composer; Inside Intelligence, BAC Opera, Lavender Hill, South London

Mr. Emmet Takes a Walk 2009 1 Act; Words David Pountney; The Magnus Festival, Orkney.

Kommilitonen! (Youngblood) 2011 2 Acts (3 tales); Words David Pountney; Royal Academy of Music

Maxwell Davies (with Birtwistle and Goehr) broke the mould. In particular his music theatre, of which *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, *Miss Donnellythorne's Maggot* and *The Medium* are really solo *scenas* for singers, are pretty powerful. Miss Donnellythorne, a real Australian character, was the origin of Dickens' Miss Havisham and is arguably the best of the three.

Mr Emmett is "*part thriller, part mystery, part black comedy*" according to David Pountney and some found it challenging as no real synopsis was provided. However it was not too difficult to understand and this writer found it very enjoyable.

Of Maxwell Davies' large scale works, once again the subject matter of them makes one use our "little grey cells" as well as our musical antennae. *Tavener* makes us ponder on the plight of the famous Tudor composer when faced with King Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy (i.e. he personally replaced the Pope in England) and his Act of The Six Articles (which demanded absolute adherence to specific RC doctrines such as transubstantiation and celibacy of priests). He narrowly escapes death for flirting with Lutherism; is persuaded to reject his music and change his faith; only to become a persecutor of Catholics – it destroys him as a man. This work, though with flaws – including the use of early instruments in a large house – made a big impact when first presented and is still, I feel, viable.

The Doctor of Myddfai is a futuristic piece, combining the fables of *The Lady in the Lake*; the mythical healing power of certain doctors; a strange, incurable new disease; Wales as part of a huge super-state and many more complexities including an important confrontation between the Ruler of the State and the Doctor. The second Act, especially, makes a powerful impact. Potentially it is splendid fare, providing the words can be heard and the programme synopsis is explanatory – neither were on its initial run.

Similar diction and the problem of incomprehensibility occurred when the mighty *Resurrection* was given a broadcast concert performance in Manchester with the public present. The BBC refused to let the composer perform it as he wished in respect of the acoustical layout of his forces. A performance in Germany had been wrecked by an uncomprehending producer and to say it is a difficult work is an understatement. Take this as a starter: a huge dummy has its brain, heart and genitals removed; a cat and TV adverts represents the Apocalypse of St John the Divine; there are machine guns and the Anti-Christ. Yes – this is just the starter. Without doubt this is a young man's work and influenced by US advertising. It features numerous soloists, a Blaze Rock Band, an Electronic Vocal Quartet and much more. Surely, as a beginning, it should feature in a Saturday Prom Concert semi-staged. It could be sensational – then we can judge it.

Davies' opera-pantomime *Cinderella* is a grand romp for children, with three prominent Ugly Sisters and a chorus of cats; while his two fairly early 1 Act (full bill) operas, *The Martyrdom of St Magnus* and *The Lighthouse* are certainly effective and go down well wherever performed. His most recent opera, *Kommilitonen - Young Blood*, is performed by, for and about students which, I was unable to see. However the well respected critic Andrew Porter, writing in *Opera* magazine, gave it a rave review. The three story lines are: the first black student to register at Mississippi University in 1962; a group of German students who were beheaded for distributing anti-Nazi leaflets in

1942/3 and a Chinese brother and sister who denounce their parents during the "Cultural Revolution", condemning them to a dreadful death. It sounds riveting.

Sir Peter has written a remarkable canon of operas and music theatre pieces. Most of it deserves to survive and to flourish in the future. But will it? Yes – in all probability.

Alexander Goehr (b. 1932)

Arden Must Die 1966 Opera in 2 Acts; Words Eric Fried; Hamburg

Triptych - Naboth's Vine Yard + Shadow Play + A Sonata for Jerusalem 1968/70
Words the composer;

Behold the Sun 1985 Opera in 3 Acts; Words the composer after fact; Duisburg

Arianna 2001 in 8 scenes after Claudio Monteverdi; Words Ottavio Rinuccini; Royal Opera

Triple Bill; Kantan + (unfinished) business + Damask Drum 2001 Words the composer after Japanese Noh plays; Almeida Festival in exile at King's Cross

Promised Land 2011 Music Theatre in 24 scenes after Shakespeare's King Lear; Adapted by the composer; English Touring Opera

Of "the three" mentioned composers who emerged from the Royal Manchester College of Music in the early seventies, Goehr is the most brittle and academic. Born in Germany and moved here aged two, he has maintained, seemingly, certain German affinities. (His father Walter Goehr was a well known conductor and composer – he conducted the premier of Tippett's *A Child of Our Time*, while his film score for David Lean's *Great Expectations* – one of the greatest British films ever made - pigeonholes him for posterity).

Goehr's first opera *Arden Must Die* was premiered in Hamburg. It is about a notorious affair in Elizabethan England when a woman and her lover murder her husband. It is tough and imaginative and received a hostile reception. Not for the murder as such but on account of the inclusion of a diatribe about people claiming to be unaware of what was happening on their doorsteps – this being too close for comfort in 1966 Hamburg. When shown at Sadler's' Wells in English this episode was reduced or cut. It needs something to replace it however, for there was a void. It is a sound, strong opera in all other respects.

His next opera, begun in 1975 and staged (again in Germany) in 1985, *Behold the Sun*, was hit by bad luck. The plot was about an Anabaptist uprising at the northern city of Munster in 1534, which was put down with great cruelty. Seemingly this would have been fine in 1975 but by 1985 the political climate had been changed in Germany by the Baader-Meinhof Gang and other acts of anarchy. So this opera became a problem and, I understand, was radically changed by the Duisburg (*Deutsch Oper Am Rhein*) producers for the worse. Shamefully it has yet to be seen here (though available on CD).

Of Goehr's two 3-work pieces of music theatre, *Triptych*, with its spiky, brittle memories of the 60s and 70s was welcomed back in the 90's. Very different – approachable and sometimes beautiful – was his *Triple Bill* based on *Japanese Noh* plays. *Damask Drum* however was strikingly robust, frightening – not something one associates with the rest of his *Triple Bill*. Equally his adaptation of Monteverdi's *Arianna* was mostly approachable – a combination of pastiche Monteverdi, straight Goehr, and a combination of the two. *The Lament* is rather long and some found it somewhat trying (including myself who, without an interval, found it hard on the bottom). But this

sincere, intelligent work is a legitimate piece of creativity and will, surely, return one day.

Goehr's last opera I was unable to see – *Promised Land* based on *King Lear*. The critics were split except on the point that he had actually written a *King Lear* opera, whereas others with huge operatic credentials (Verdi, Britten) had failed to do so. Comments ranged from "*highly intelligent*" downwards. The consensus seemed to be that it was a work to be respected but a hard work to like, let alone love.

Selection 5 – "Following On"

There is a stark reality about Nigel Osborne's operas, most of which seem to represent the pessimistic, negative and nihilistic attitudes of their times amongst the intellectuals. No harm in that – all views need airing. Yet it is difficult not to compare them with, only a little later, the subject matters chosen by Michael Berkeley. During this period, there are also operas written with a softer touch, especially those designed for children; while others provide a great variety for the general public. I deal with these in **Selection 6**.

Nigel Osborne (b, 1948)

Hell's Angels 1986 2 Acts; Words David Freeman; Greater London Council & Opera Factory; Royal Court Theatre

The Electrification of the Soviet Union 1987 3 Acts; Words Craig Raine; Glyndebourne Touring & Festival

Terrible Mouth 1992 1 Act; Words Howard Barker; Almeida Opera

Sarajevo 1994 1 *The Women of Troy* by Euripides, words adapted by Don Taylor; 2 *Sarajevo*, words collected by the composer; 3 *Sand Storm*, words Craig Raine; Opera Factory on tour

The Piano Tuner 2004 Fugato Opera with Prologue, 2 Acts, Epilogue; Words Amanda Holden after Daniel Mason; Music Theatre Wales on tour

I gave *Hell's Angels* a rotten review in *BMS News*, as being offensive to many religious people and with male and female nudity going to excess. The main thrust of the plot was that a Borgia Pope caused the introduction of syphilis to Europe as a punishment for his wickedness and that the short term Pope John Paul I was poisoned and was responsible for AIDS, as a punishment for failing to introduce birth control and for not dealing with Vatican financial malpractice. Perhaps coincidentally, Satan is the best drawn character – indeed he is brilliantly portrayed. Of course times have changed since 1986 (e.g. look at the Jerry Springer Opera). So perhaps it should be given another try?

The Electrification of the Soviet Union is tailor-made musically, portraying Boris Pasternak's anguish just after the Russian Revolution (Lenin is quoted to create the title). His relationships with his family, employers, whore, governess and others are scrutinised, until he finally makes a stand against socialism. A fine if unsettling opera, it was revived a few years later to much success.

Terrible Mouth is a distressing work, though one cannot ignore its effectiveness. Parts made this writer feel almost unwell. It features outrages in Spain after the French Revolution, when Goya becomes involved in severed heads, battered babies, rape and murder. There are gruesomely macabre wordless pleas from the wounded awaiting medical attention, together with retching sounds from six cellos.

Sarajevo is a work of searing sincerity and the composer did his best to help in Sarajevo bravely and personally under fire. At the time one felt that the Euripides aspect did not work and this writer was (against his better instincts) largely unmoved by the dreadful

happenings which we – as a nation – did nothing to alleviate. However this work must be judged again, surely?

The Piano Tuner is a different kettle of tea – with a musical Burmese background that is remarkable and beautiful for most of the time. In a colonial setting (the military are the baddies) it has an enthralling plot – after a distinctly shaky start. A British doctor has “gone native” up-country and needs his piano tuned and repaired as a matter of diplomatic necessity when dealing with the local Burmese. A British piano tuner is sent there but he falls in love with the doctor’s Burmese housekeeper and from then onwards it is tragedy. The opera is relatively easy to enjoy both musically and as drama.

Osborne has written several other operas or works for the stage. He is working on *Nacikita* (a 70 minute epic), due to be performed near Mostar (Croatia) by Opera Circus as part of their 2011 Christmas fund raising activity. It sounds pretty grim, though moving stuff. His true contribution to contemporary opera since the mid-eighties has still to be fully assessed. It will, I am sure, be found to be considerable.

Michael Berkeley (b. 1948)

Baa-Baa Black Sheep - A Jungle Tale 1993 Opera in 3 Acts; Words David Malouf after Kipling; Opera North at Cheltenham Festival

Jane Eyre 2000 Opera in 2 Acts; Words David Malouf after Charlotte Bronte; Music Theatre Wales at the Buxton Festival

For You 2008 2 Acts; Words Ian McEwen; Music Theatre Wales at the Linbury Theatre, ROH

Berkeley’s first opera is one of the best written since 1952. *Baa-Baa Black Sheep* encapsulates the unhappy childhood of Rudyard Kipling at Southsea, while his parents lived and worked in India. This brings out his early memories of India, where the kindly servants taught him *The Law of the Jungle* and wove in to his imagination good influences such as Baloo the Bear, Bagheera the Panther and Kaa the Python – plus the evil bully Shere Khan the Tiger. Apart from the excellent multi-layered plot, which is enthralling in its own right, when it comes to Kipling’s alter ego, Mowgli, killing Shere Khan and the destruction of the human village by a herd of elephants, the scope for good “theatre” is enormous.

It took two visits to Berkeley’s *Jane Eyre* for me to look upon this opera in a benign light. This very shortened version of the famous novel does, with hindsight, work quite well, though not a patch on its predecessor or its successor. *For You* tackles a subject matter which, as far as I know, is new to opera – the fear and actuality of impotency. This is a libretto-led work and Berkeley’s role is to follow the words which he does admirably, though providing orchestral interludes when he can. It is about a brilliant, if randy, composer whose technique to get his lady orchestral players into bed is to write them special cadenzas. On this occasion, when it comes to it, though stripped for action, he cannot perform. Complications follow. She is furious at his “failure”; he is jealous of his sick wife’s friendship with her doctor; his assistant resents having to copy the additional cadenza; his Polish housekeeper thinks he has proposed marriage to her when he has not. Then somebody turns off his wife’s support machine; and during the final rehearsal he is arrested for murder. Nobody helps him. This music drama gripped the audience as had *Baa-Baa*. Let us hope more works of such quality will follow.

Selection 6 – “Softer Touches”

Oliver Knussen (b. 1952)

Higglety Pigglety Pop and ***Where the Wild Things Are*** Two one Act operas played together; Words Maurice Sendak; Glyndebourne Touring & Festival

This delightful double bill, for children and adults alike, relies heavily on its staging and the special effects that illustrate the two plots. The second and best, is about the imaginary adventures of a naughty boy punished by banishment to his room. The second is about a dog, a Sealyham, who ends up as "top of the bill" in an animal theatre. Musically both are strengthened by orchestral interludes and possibly need to be. Despite potential production difficulties, these two little gems (especially good for children) deserve to survive.

Judith Weir (b. 1954)

The Black Spider 1985 Children's Opera in 3 Acts; Words the composer; Kent Opera with Frank Hooker School at Canterbury Cathedral

A Night at the Chinese Opera 1987 Opera in 3 Acts; Words the composer; Kent Opera at the Cheltenham Festival

The Vanishing Bridegroom 1990 3 Parts; Words the composer after Scottish tales; Scottish Opera

Armide 2005 TV film; Words not credited; Channel 4 TV

Blond Ekbert Revised 2006 2 Acts; Words the composer after Ludwig Thieck; Originally ENO - revised by Music Theatre Wales at the Linbury, Covent Garden

Miss Fortune (Achterbahn) Performed at Bregenz Festival 2011; Words the composer after a Sicilian folk tale *Sfortuna*.

Judith Weir is a composer who selects unusual, even tantalising plots. Her first two operas *The Black Spider* and *A Night at the Chinese Opera* certainly impressed by their originality, running two story lines in parallel successfully in each case. *The Vanishing Bridegroom*, which Scottish Opera took to Covent Garden (where it was very popular) and showed on TV, is slightly more complex. It is about three unconnected Gaelic tales which Weir welds together by introducing the same characters into them. Her music fits both the stories and the characters to a tee. All three operas deserve revival and survival.

Based on the Greek fable (also used by Gluck and Rossini), *Armide* is a well meaning curiosity set in the Second Gulf War. Written for TV, it has points to make about the conflict between love and duty (between a TV reporter and an army officer) in a war zone and makes them quite well. She also manages to relate how boots designed for use in the Falklands conflict were sent for use in the desert! Her next work, *Blond Ekbert*, took the unusual plot strain too far by half. It was pretty bad as an opera and emptied (almost) the London Coliseum, though the music was “*marvellous in its lucidity and support for the work*”. I only mention it because Weir revised it some years later and improved it greatly, though many of the illogicalities still remain. I see it has now been played at the Amsterdam and Rotterdam Festivals (2011) and also featured at the Bregenz Festival. Writing in *Opera* magazine, Shirley Apthorpe considered it to be “gripping”. Good news indeed.

Miss Fortune is the story of the daughter of a Lord and Lady Fortune who enjoys a flutter on a post-crash stock exchange but, as the title implies, hits misfortune. After a showing at Bregenz, *Miss Fortune* was staged at Covent Garden in March 2011.

Selection 7 – “Tougher Fare”

Mark-Antony Turnage (b. 1960)

Greek 1988 Munich; subsequently by ENO at the London Coliseum and on TV

Twice Through the Heart 1997 Dramatic Scena for mezzo-soprano; (See below)

The Country of the Blind 1997 Six scenes (effectively 1 Act); Words by Clare Venable after H.G. Wells; English National Opera at the Aldeburgh Festival

The Silver Tassie 2000 Opera in 4 Acts; Words Amanda Holden after Sean O'Casey; English National Opera at the London Coliseum

Anna Nicole 2011 Opera in 2 Acts; Words Richard Thomas; Royal Opera

Greek set the scene with Turnage – in the main a telling in modern terms of the Oedipus tragedy. The highlight, if that is the word, is the shocking moment he realises that he has in fact murdered his father and married his mother. The low point is what appears to be a personal attack on Margaret Thatcher – I don't give tuppence about the politics – but this is bound to become dated and to wear thin, thereby prejudicing its future prospects. It was toured by Music Theatre Wales round the UK in 2011, including at the Cheltenham and Buxton Festivals. Rian Evans, writing in *Opera* magazine gave it a splendid report.

Turnage's Aldeburgh double bill was adequate enough. The dramatic *scena* *Twice Through the Heart* was quite powerful, about an imprisoned wife who has killed her husband, who has for years maltreated her. H. G. Wells' well known tale *The Country of the Blind* – about a man who finds himself stranded in a valley where everyone is blind makes for a good short opera. He soon realises that in “the country of the blind” the one-eyed man is NOT king. However with *The Silver Tassie* Turnage entered another league altogether. Set in pre-rebellion Dublin in 1915, the *Silver Tassie* is the football cup brought back home in triumph. There is religious bigotry to face, wife battering, the volunteering to go to the trenches, the terrible injuries and the award of the Victoria Cross. In short, this is a convincing and serious opera that received a rapturous reception at the London Coliseum. We are an odd lot, we opera goers – for when it was revived attendance was abysmal. Very strange.

As for *Anna Nicole*, seen on a DVD, this is a story based on fact. It is an “advance” for the composer in terms of trendy modernism, well received by the audience. His librettist (of the very funny and popular, though destined to be short-lived, Jerry Springer - The Opera) provided a script, sometimes witty and sometimes seriously good, but full of four letter F and C words that determined the tone of the piece. Flat-chested Anna, from Texas, has a breast implant that enables her to “dance” in a Gentleman's Club, where she meets and marries a 90 year old oil billionaire who speaks three languages (American, English and Australian). After his death, dying intestate, she falls into the hands of a manipulative lawyer who exploits her on TV (including on the Larry King Show) until she finally dies, obese, of a drug overdose. This is a justified attack on the American chat-show personality culture and our current UK obsession with so-called “celebrities”. As such it is worth one visit to test the water.

James MacMillan (b.1959)

Listening to his CDs of non-operatic works, MacMillan struck me as a genius (e.g. *Sun Dogs* & the percussion concerto *Veni Veni Emanuel*). His two full length operas are remarkably sound and show an instinctive understanding of what works in the theatre. The music is reasonably accessible (slightly easier than Birtwistle and much easier than

Osborne). His choral writing is strong including the liturgical elements. He uses his percussion unsparingly. Both operas received excellent receptions from their audiences.

Ines de Castro 1997 Opera in 2 Acts; Words John Clifford; Scottish Opera at Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, Glasgow

The Sacrifice 2007 Opera in 3 Acts; Words Michael Symmons Roberts; Welsh National Opera at the Welsh Millennium Centre, Cardiff

Clemency 2011 Chamber Opera in 1 (45 minute) Act; Words Michael Symmons Roberts after Genesis 18; Royal Opera at the Linbury Theatre

Inez de Castro is strong stuff, about Spanish and Portuguese political intrigue and warfare. Inez is the Spanish mistress of the Portuguese crown prince. She is executed in his absence at war for alleged spying. This causes a gruesome bloodbath among the conspirators and during the prince's coronation her ghost appears. In some respects it reminded me of the way Puccini handled such political matters in his "Two Ts"

The Sacrifice is quite different, based on part of the Welsh Saga, the *Mabinogion*, depicting conflict between Ireland and Wales in ages past. The "peace process" depends on the marriage of the son and daughter respectively of the two warring terrorist leaders. Unfortunately for the politicians, the daughter's fiancé takes great umbrage at this. There follows much melodrama at the wedding and the eventual death of one of the negotiators. There are disturbing parallels in various contorted, near-hopeless parts world, where greed and ignorance reign. This is a very good opera. The audience sat silent for quite a while before bursting into applause.

Clemency seems to be a strange and (to quote) "disturbing" work, with both the composer and librettist being Roman Catholics yet writing an opera that, to quote Andrew Porter, depicts God "*as a bloodthirsty baddie*". It tells the tale of Abraham and Sarah begetting and conceiving a child in extreme old age followed by the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and with the angels seen to be "determined" killers. The music seems to support the plot rather than the other way round, a trend seen in other operas. It sounds fascinating.

Selection 8 – "Bright & Shining"

Jonathan Dove (b.1959)

In Jonathan Dove we really do have a composer of "*opera for the people*". He has a large output and is not infallible: the TV opera *The Death of a Princess* was misconceived, for example. However most of his community operas are, by repute, just the thing!

Siren Song, 1994, 1 Act (full bill); Words Nick Dear; Almeida Opera / Almeida Festival

Flight 1998 Opera in 3 Acts; Words April de Angelis; Glyndebourne Touring & Festival

Tobias and the Angel 1999 Church opera; Words David Lan after the Apocrypha; Almeida Opera at Almeida Festival

The Little Green Swallow 2005 Introduction & 2 Acts; Words Carlo Gozzi (trans Adam Pollock); Guildhall School of Music and Drama

The Enchanted Pig 2007 2 Acts; Words Alasdair Middleton; Young Vic etc on tour

The Adventures of Pinocchio 2008 2 Acts; Words Alasdair Middleton; Opera North at Leeds

When *Siren Song* appeared at the Almeida Festival, it instantly struck that this opera, a work about an unworldly young sailor, serving on the Ark Royal, who takes on a lady pen-pal with unfortunate results, showed enormous potential. Though some found the

plot, quite a chiller eventually, a little hard to swallow (though not for those who have served in or been attached to a Royal Navy ship), it made for an excellent, tantalising evening. Then followed *Flight* at Glyndebourne, toured round the country and shown on TV with great success. Again, this was a clever, "different" plot about life in an airport waiting area with a strange mixture of characters, including one who is a "permanent resident". It contains one of the funniest pieces of pure farce I have seen in opera (yes, somebody loses his trousers), balanced and blended well against the more poignant aspects.

Dove's completely serious *Tobias and the Angel* was very effective musically and narrated the Apocryphal tale well. The Angel Raphael looks after Tobias during the Babylonian Captivity at Nineveh during various trials and tribulations, finally finding him a wife whose seven previous husbands had been murdered. With it, surviving the unfortunate precedents, he achieves spiritual and worldly fulfilment. His *The Little Green Swallow* was another competent piece, with a backing of minimalism and a counter-tenor in the lead role, which made one feel all was well in the world; while his *Enchanted Pig* is an absolute delight for all ages, with plenty of good tunes.

Similarly *The Adventures of Pinocchio* is another crackingly good piece. What with being swallowed by a whale and set adventures in Funland and a circus, this was a splendid piece where children can learn to appreciate musical theatre the easy way – though over half the seats when I saw it were taken by adults. Yes – this is a composer to enjoy.... and so also is

Thomas Ades (b. 1971)

Powder Her Face 1992 2 Acts; Words Paul Henscher; Almeida

The Tempest 2004 3 Acts; Words Meredith Oakes after Shakespeare; Royal Opera

This setting of *The Tempest* is a fine achievement by any standards – the audience left the Royal Opera House in a cheerful, fulfilled mood. We witnessed not only a brilliant production and casting but also a setting (factually a re-writing in rhyme) of a very difficult play – known universally – with the characters and plot well handled in both music and drama. The risk factor is the role of Ariel – a coloratura soprano role almost equalling I imagine, the Queen of the Night in terms of difficulty.

Some time earlier, Ades had a splendid time with parody and pastiche of pop and the sixties music in *Powder Her Face*, a tale about the often varied sex-life of the notorious Duchess of Devonshire. It was good, amusing entertainment, certainly, both on stage and on the TV – however *The Tempest* is what he will be remembered for – so far.

Selection 9 – “Superior Musicals”

I shall not spend too much time on Musicals, though the best ones often equal or even outshine poor operas. They are modern day operettas and countries like Germany, with plenty of operatic “space”, include them within their repertoires. The United States has dominated this field since the twenties, but in recent years the UK has produced some very good shows.

Lionel Bart – *Lock Up Your Daughters, Oliver*

Oliver, in particular, is already a "classic".

Andrew Lloyd Webber – of his many shows, I feel that *Cats* is quite outstanding with its strong dance element and T. S. Eliot base. The following, on consideration will probably survive for a long time on sheer commercial grounds: *Joseph and the*

Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, Jesus Christ Superstar, Evita and Phantom of the Opera.

Others that should, in my view, survive, though tending to be ignored by the coach parties coming to the West End and therefore less commercially successful: ***Aspects of Love, The Beautiful Game*** and ***The Woman in White***.

Elton John – Billy Elliott. Adapted from the popular film – it works very well as a musical. The storyline is likely to propel it into revivals, even if politically naive and biased. Maggie Thatcher is the unseen villain.

Richard Alexander & Marek Rymasowski – A Model Girl. A musical based on the Profumo Affair with Christine Keeler. The characters of pimp Dr. Simon Ward; spy and lover Eugene Ivanov; the reptilian Colonel Wigg were well drawn. Valerie Hobson was not. Harold Macmillan and Mandy Rice-Davies were not featured. Clever and witty, with careful casting to suit the characters, it could be very successful.

Interlude

Apart from those operas and composers selected already in this article, there are numerous others, which could be useful in the future. And there are two particular features: firstly, the sheer variety of subject matters is truly enormous; secondly, this variety has been enhanced by composers immigrating from the Commonwealth and, indeed, their offspring. The USA is also currently producing a variety of good operas by various composers (and they are not all minimalist offerings, though quite a few are). The point is that they are written in English and the more operas that are written in English, the greater is the advantage for the long-term to our own products.

Selection 10 – “Operas that warrant occasional airings”

In this selection are listed many deserving cases, most of which gave much pleasure in their time – or were ahead of their time and misunderstood – which could possibly, even probably, attract the attention of our opera companies and festivals under the right circumstances. Double the number could have been selected. Even well known composers have been omitted altogether. Others have had one or two works chosen and their remainder not listed. In some cases it is because the writer has not seen them – and BMS member John Joubert’s well regarded *Under Western Eyes* and *Silas Marner* are cases in point. (See also **Selection 11**). However, more often the writer has seen them, but has tried not to include the second best.

Richard Rodney Bennett b.1936 *The Mines of Sulphur* 1965 Sadler’s Wells Opera at Sadler’s Wells; Opera in 2 Acts; Words Beverly Cross;

This is quite a good ghost story cum chiller. It is likeable and was popular but lacks any really good tunes – it sounds more like background music but is still quite gripping.

David Blake b.1936 *Toussaint* 1977 Revised 1983 English National Opera at the London Coliseum; Opera in 2 Acts; Words Anthony Ward;

A very large scale work (with approaching 50 solo parts and compared in size to Prokofiev’s *War and Peace*) it is about a slave who attained political rule in Haiti but was betrayed by the colonial power (France). Industrial action by the ENO caused the cancellation of much of its initial run. On return it was, one is led to believe, improved. It is flawed, with poor characterisation and with major irrelevancies in the plot – but nevertheless is a fascinating piece.

Alan Bush 1900-1995 *Wat Tyler* Performed 1953 though written earlier; Stadtheater, Leipzig; Opera in Prologue & 2 Acts; Words Nancy Bush;

This is a neo-communist “black and white” portrayal of the *Peasant’s Revolt* by Wat Tyler and John Bull. It colourfully includes their confrontation with King Richard II, and has good choral backing.

Men of Blackmoor 1955 (East) German National Theatre, Weimar; Opera in 3 Acts; Words Nancy Bush;

The true story of 18th century striking miners in Co. Durham/Northumbria, it covers their unjust treatment. It is flawed but powerful and is laced with folk songs.

John Casken b.1949 Golem 1989 Almeida Opera at Almeida Festival; Opera in 2 Parts; Words the composer with Pierre Audi;

In this biblical plot, a rabbi creates a figure out of clay. However it assumes a character of its own with disastrous results.

God’s Liar 2001 Almeida Opera at Almeida Festival; Opera in 6 scenes; Words Emma Warner and the composer after Tolstoy;

Set in Tsarist Russia, a former Army officer becomes a hermit calling himself Father Sergius. In modern Cambridge, a researcher finds his diaries and is persuaded to sell them to Hollywood. One does not have to guess the result.

Gordon Crosse b.1937 Purgatory 1966 New Opera Company at the Cheltenham Festival; Opera in 1 Act; Words the composer after W. B. Yates;

Here we have a bleak, murderous setting about an Irish peddler and his son. It is effectively uncompromising and grim. It needs a carefully chosen companion piece.

Roberto Gerhard 1886-1970 The Duenna 1992 Teatro Lirico, Madrid; Opera in 3 Acts; Words the composer after Sheridan;

A very good comedy opera, the German critics at Bielefeld commented that it was “a rediscovered masterpiece.... a Spanish Opera set in Spain to an English play”. It successfully and hilariously follows the spirit of the original play.

Berthold Goldschmidt 1903-1966 Beatrice Cenci (performed) 1994 at Magdeburg; Words Martin Easlin after Shelley;

At the roots of this opera are rape, assassination, incest and papal skulduggery. It is at the very heart of the European operatic tradition. A prudish Covent Garden refused to stage it, despite its obvious merits.

Iain Hamilton 1902-2000 The Cataline Conspiracy 1974 Scottish Opera at Stirling; Opera in 2 Acts; Words the composer after Ben Johnson;

Musically tough, it relates an incident in Ancient Rome involving Cicero. It also reflects modern society with astonishing realism. It is worthwhile if difficult.

Jonathan Harvey b.1939 The Inquest of Love 1993 English National Opera at the London Coliseum; Opera in 2 Acts; Words the composer with David Rudkin;

This is a vision of love, death and the afterlife – very English in its approach with echoes from its literary and operatic roots. It has been described as “*baffling but warm hearted*”.

Wilfred Josephs 1927-1997 Rebecca 1983 Opera North at Birmingham; Opera in 2 Acts; Words Edward March after Daphne du Maurier;

This was very popular with audiences and received much international “acclaim” so Google tells us. It certainly fitted the well-known story line nicely. . How well will it wear? – that is the question.

Kenneth Leighton 1929-1988 *Columba* 1981 Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama; Opera in 1 (very short) Act; Words Edwin Morgan;

The late John Dodd, who saw a revival in Glasgow Cathedral in 1986, was most enthusiastic, both for the music ("*what a marvellous composer he is*") and the drama. It is about the Saint's life amongst the warring Druids and Picts, with Scotland emerging as a Christian country.

John Lunn b.1969 *Tangier Tattoo* 2006 Glyndebourne Touring Opera; Opera in 2 Acts; Words. Stephen Plaice;

We have here a very entertaining comedy-thriller daringly set as an opera. With a male British back-packer and an American female (incognito) counter- terrorism agent; a bag full of cash belonging to some assassinated drug dealers; and several well drawn if unlikely characters – it worked surprisingly well. (See also **Selection 11**)

John Metcalf *Tonrak* 1990 Welsh National Opera on Tour (with Banff Center for the Arts); Opera in 2 Acts; Words Michael Wilcox;

The plot is of an Inuit (Eskimo) girl who rescues a drowning sailor. He takes her back to Victorian Britain, where she is shown as a freak. Tonraks are the Inuit spirits (polar bears and eagles) and Act I, set in Canada with Inuit influenced music, is excellent. Back in Britain it is less convincing – except at the very end – however it is so unusual it is worth reviving.

Thea Musgrave b.1928 *The Decision* 1967 New Opera Company at Sadlers' Wells; Opera in 3 Acts; Words Maurice Lindsey;

The question is whether it is practical to rescue a trapped coal miner, whose relations with the foreman's wife are factors in the decision making process. There is fine choral writing and is an exciting experience.

The Voice of Ariadne 1989 English Opera Group at the Aldeburgh Festival; Chamber Opera in 3 Acts; Words Almalia Alguers;

This is a strange plot about the would-be excavation of a statue of Ariadne in Rome – only a hand is found, which leads to mystical complications and ultimately to tragedy. Needs to be very carefully handled to succeed.

Robert Saxton b.1942 *Caritas* 1991 Opera North at Wakefield (part of Huddersfield Festival); 2 Acts with no interval; Words Arnold Wesker;

Here we have a harrowing tale about a young novice, in the middle ages, who decides to have herself walled up for life as an act of self sacrifice. Later when she changes her mind, the church decrees that life means life. Her plight is deeply moving and is backed by some ferocious orchestral writing.

David Sawyer b.1986 *From Morning to Midnight* 2001 English National Opera at the London Coliseum; Opera in 2 Acts; Words the composer after Georg Kaiser;

This is a very entertaining if sometimes worrying tale about a German bank cashier who steals from his bank. He believes that an Italian lady customer he fancies is a crook. She is not and tragedy ultimately follows. (See also **Selection 12**)

Selection 11 – "*Small-scale Operas that may be of use on the Fringe*"

This selection, though extensive could have been doubled. There are many "festivals" and "fringe" organisations that are good at presenting "rare birds" and perhaps are not quite so good when tackling the main repertoire. Here the variety is quite staggering

and some could well suit the adventurous, if carefully selected for their particular audiences and locations.

Richard Ayres b.1965 *The Cricket Recovers* 2005 Almeida Opera at Almeida Festival; Words Rosalie Hirs after Toon Tellengen;

Very well received when it appeared, it is an ebulliently scored tale of a depressed cricket and an elephant that wants to climb trees. They become cured of their fantasy ailments by psychology. This is not as daft as it first appears – because yes, it works!

Paul Barker b.1958 *Pillow Song* 1988 Modern Music Theatre, The Place, London; One-act Music Theatre (30 minutes); Words “crafted” by the composer from the French;

A most attractive little piece set in China; the late Arthur Jacobs commented to me that he considered it really beautiful. It is pleasingly (and unusually for this composer) unpretentious

Wall 1990 (as above) One-act Music Theatre; Words - a mixture;

Tellingly effective, an actor recites pieces about the Great Wall of China, Snout’s Wall (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) and the Berlin Wall. Barker weaves his magic with five trombones, a pre-recorded tape and a singer. Very enjoyable.

Richard Blackford b.1954 *Metamorphosis* 1983 Royal College of Music; Opera cycle in 5 Parts; Words the composer after Ovid;

This is a very ambitious work, a condensed history of mankind’s behaviour beginning with his creation out of chaos and following on with several mythological examples. It has a major role for an actor, as Ovid or narrator. It was well reviewed.

Diana Burrell b.1948 *The Albatross* 1997 Trinity College of Music at the Spitalfields Festival; Opera in 2 Acts; Words the composer after Susan Hill;

We have here a profoundly, touching story, well reviewed, of a mentally retarded boy in Suffolk.

Philip Cashian b.1966 *The Cumnor Affair* 2009 Tête à Tête at Riverside Studios; Opera in 2 Acts; Words Iain Pears;

Called “*An Elizabethan Murder Mystery*”, it is a very well known one. Did Robert Dudley murder his wife so he could marry the Queen? This is a fascinating work combining music and history. The “living” portrait of Queen Elizabeth I is present throughout as if casting a quizzical eye on the proceedings.

Julian Grant b. 1960 *A Family Affair* 1993 Almeida Opera and Festival; Opera in 3 Acts; Words Nick Dear;

This is a very funny tale of Russian petty bourgeois with no ethics, though one suffers from piles (a first in opera?). Every word is audible so the combined wit in the words and score is very telling. Though loved by the audience – the critics were snooty.

Prophet and Loss 2011 Oundle Festival; Words the composer;

This is about a “*study of family relationships*” writes Graeme Feggetter sympathetically in *Opera* magazine. Set in Baluchistan, it is about an oil baroness who, after a car crash, gives her body to the sick villagers. Feggetter would like to hear the score again.

Deidre Gribbin b.1967 *Hey Persephone!* 1999 Almeida Opera at Almeida Festival;

An updating of the legend of the Queen of the Underworld, it is set in modern-day Glasgow. The script is appallingly believable, with sex a prominent and musically explicit feature (even “out-Straussing” Richard Strauss) – so is whisky. The score is

skilful and suited to the different locations, personalities and situations. A fascinating work, it knits together the words, music and theatre admirably.

John Hardy *The Roswell Incident* 1997 Music Theatre Wales on Tour; Chamber Opera in 2 Acts; Words Heledd Wyn;

One recalls this very odd incident in the USA, which makes for an intriguing, witty opera. Was there really a UFO? Was it a Cover-Up by the CIA and the military? Or was it a load of boloney?

Alun Hoddinott 1929-2008 *What the Old Man Does is Always Right* 1977 Fishguard Festival; One-Act Opera for children; Words Myfanwy Piper;

This, a delightful little piece suitable for everyone, is quite untypical of this composer – and especially his other (rather stolid) operas.

Ed Hughes b.1968 *The Birds* 2005 *I Faglioni* with The Opera Group at the City of London Festival; Words Glyn Maxwell after Aristophanes' fantastical comedy;

It is about a fed-up Athenian who decides to live with the birds but introduces to them the very rules and regulations he dislikes. There was much praise for the scoring and the strong "choral" element, a grouping of minor characters that formed a kind of Greek chorus. It was well received.

Tunde Jegede b.1972 *Cry of Innocence* 2006 Shown successfully for a short run at the Greenwich Theatre by Gyenyame for Performing Arts and Trinity College of Music; Opera in 4 Acts; Words the composer and Lawrence Cole Junior;

This topical opera is a powerful and disturbing portrayal of appalling race relations, featuring a white agitator and a family of black immigrants whose son is murdered by a white gang. The police do little; the father returns to the West Indies; the mother remains to fight for justice. The minimalist music and gospel choirs lack some of the required bite the strong storyline demands, though the final scene redeems and justifies itself.

John Joubert b.1927 *The Wayfarers* 1984 Children's Opera, Shepway Opera;

Based on Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale*, its uncompromising story, at the time of the Black Death, of crusading zeal, greed, treachery and the reviving power of nature makes a useful addition to the school operatic repertoire.

Julian Joseph b.1966 *Bridgewater: a Fable of 1807* 2007 English Touring Opera; A Jazz Opera in a Prologue and 2 parts; Words Mike Phillips;

It is an interesting and true story of a slave brought to England, with results both unpredictable and ultimately predictable. Such historical figures as the Prince Regent, Mrs Fitzherbert and Beethoven appear. It was well received, though a misguided, supportive claque seemed to be in evidence.

Dominique Le Grande b.1976 *Bird of Night* Version no 1 at the Linbury Theatre, Royal Opera; Revised to full length 2006; Opera in 2 Acts;

A Caribbean story of supernatural and devilish practices, it is about a girl who wants to imitate her godmother, who at night transforms into a *Bird of Night* (a good bird) but is really a *Soucyant* (evil bird). A tale of choices between good and evil, it is atmospherically effective. Somewhere behind the Satanic Mass we witnessed lurks, surely, more than a hint of voodooism. Nevertheless the happy ending has the Satanist consumed by the Fires of Hell.

The Burial at Thebes 2008 Manning Camerata at the Shakespeare Globe Theatre; Opera in 2 Acts; Words Seamus Heaney after Sophocles' grim *Antigone*;

The text taxes Le Gendre but, unlike the critics, I found it pretty stimulating. Well worth another go.

John Lunn b.1969 *Misper* 1998 Glyndebourne Educational Project: Opera for children (numerous Sussex schools participated); Words Stephen Plaice;

"Misper" is police lingo for a "missing person". In it, it recounts, in a thoroughly enjoyable manner, a time-warp venture set between Ancient China and modern Sussex. It contains some good tunes and pleasing "Chinese" pastiche.

Stuart MacRae b.1976 *The Assassin Tree* 2006 Scottish Opera at the Edinburgh Festival; 3 short Acts; Words Simon Armitage;

Classical tale of the goddess Diana and the priest who guards her golden bough from slaves, who want their freedom.

Ian McQueen b.1962 *Line of Terror* 1987 UK premier Almeida Opera/Festival; Opera in 1 Act; Words (one assumes the composer?);

The Judith story, strongly projected, laced with terrorism and a chorus likened to Puccini. The murder of Holofernes is competently built-up, with sensuous music and oriental touches.

Stephen Oliver 1950-1992 *Mario the Magician* 1992 Almeida Opera at Almeida Festival; Opera in 1 Act; Words the composer after Thomas Mann;

Somewhat unusually for Oliver, he gives us riveting theatre. It is about a professional magician who hypnotises, dominates and fascinates his public - till things get out of control.

Roxanna Panufnik b.1968 *The Music Programme* 2000 Polish State at the Linbury (ROH Festival); Opera in 1 Act; Words Paul Micau;

A "plot", in theory, about an Inspector checking on how UN money is being spent providing music in the African jungle, it seems to be a study of the acceptability of modern music. The resident composer likes atonal music, his wife loves Mozart. The Inspector seduces the wife on top of the grand piano. The composer's "great" atonal composition represents this fornication, including her three squeaks of ecstasy. The UN programme remains, needless to say, untouched. The orchestral sound was varied and witty, as was the libretto despite some needless diversions. Well received, (a supportive claque seemed in evidence) but the verdict must be: "*Could have been little better*".

Lynn Plowman Gwyneth & the Green Knight 2003 Music Theatre Wales at the Linbury Theatre, Royal Opera House.(originally at Brecon); Adventure for Families in 2 Acts; Words Martin Riley;

A pleasing spoof (not a feminist plug) on the well known tale – King Arthur and Sir Gawain are indecisive wimps; Mordred a choirboy and contemporary yob; and Gwyneth a working class girl striving for her place at the top. It seemed to be enjoyed more by the accompanying adults than by their kids.

House of the Gods 2006 Music Theatre Wales at the Linbury Theatre, ROH 2; Opera in 2 Acts; Words Martin Riley;

This is a truly unusual and remarkable work about Celtic Gods living in a London house! It has, though, serious overtones about the after effects on the Great War (WWI) wounded. What with forbidden apples, bullets caught by hand, a woman-on-top sex scene and the villain drowned in a tub – it received a rousing reception and was lauded by many critics.

Roger Steptoe b.1953 *King of Macedon* 1983 Charterhouse; Opera in 2 Acts; Words Ursula Vaughan Williams;

This relates to the build-up to the assassination of King Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander. It has a good storyline with excellent casting opportunities, both dramatic and lyrical. The Grand March needs a little pruning.

Phyllis Tate 1911-1987 *The Lodger* 1960 Royal Academy of Music; Opera in 2 Acts; Words David Franklin;

A landlady, short of money, takes in a lodger who is found to be a religious maniac. Eventually he is seen to be Jack the Ripper, with the landlady uncertain as to what she should do. It is atmospheric and fairly gripping but alleviated by the inclusion of a jolly Victorian music hall-type tune sung by the chorus.

Will Todd b.1970 *The Blackened Man* First complete performance at Buxton Festival 2004; Opera in 2 Acts; Words Ben Bonwell;

It is a forcefully projected, well considered piece about a miner, hanged unjustly for murder in the 1930's in North East England.

Andrew Toovey b.1962 *The Juniper Tree* 1993 Hand-held script performance at Broomhill, near Southborough, Kent. Staged 1995; Chamber opera in 1 Act; Words Dic Edwards based on the Grimm Brothers fairy tale;

Scored for 4 singers and 7 instruments, beginning with a plaintive viola solo, it contains assertive harmonies but it makes for a moving work, though hardly family-friendly or for the squeamish.

Param Vir Ion (1994) completed 2003 Almeida Opera at Almeida Festival; Opera in 4 scenes with prologue; Words David Lan after Euripides;

The unusual tale is related to Apollo's son, Ion, who is almost murdered (poisoned) by his mother, Creusa, who is unaware of his identity. It has a happy ending however. The chamber orchestra provides excitement and a variety of sound (with Indian influences possibly). The five female servants form, when needed, a mini-Greek chorus and sing music that is both beautiful and dramatic as required. It was well reviewed.

Errollyn Wallen b. Belize 1958 *Another America: Earth* 2004 ROH 2 at the Linbury Theatre; Opera in 2 Acts; Words the composer;

This is an ambitious project studying the "black condition" past, present and future. There was some critical and audience bafflement both plot-wise and regarding the music. The (Southern US) Bible Belt and Northern Bureaucrats clash head-on; while a "Star Lady" searches for Pluto with a telescope. Um! However it is worth another showing.

The Silent Twins 2007 Almeida Opera at the Almeida Festival; Opera in 2 parts; Words April de Angelis;

Well reviewed and received, this is a strange tale of two black twins who will not talk to anybody except each other. They became criminals and arsonists and were despatched to Broadmoor. There they lost their virginities and wrote novels and poems about their crimes. A true story, the grimness is relieved by a sparkling score and a witty script.

Selection 12 – “Young(er) Composers who stood out in Mini-Operas”

During the nineties there was a spate of schemes (*The Garden Venture*, *Bayliss Programme*) followed by others such as *Tête à Tête* encouraging young composers to write mini (10-30 minute) operas. Some were rubbish – others just missed the bus. But

the nominated young composers listed here, showed an ability to write their music not only to fit their librettists' words but also to create good "theatre", the three basic ingredients of good opera. This of course was up to about 15 years ago. Most are probably in or approaching their thirties. Are they still composing? And are they composing opera?

The encouraging thing is that all (except John Hawkins) have a Google network and are shown as Composers. Some have gone into "Pop". Some have opera and music theatre as their specialities. It will be interesting to look up this list in a few years time and see how they progressed – or disappeared. A "funny" feature is that some who did very badly initially (not listed) did well or quite well later on and the reverse of some who did well initially but who failed when expanding their works.

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| National Youth Music Theatre: | Tod McNeil | <i>Virtual Reality</i> |
| The Garden Venture: | Prithi Paintal | <i>Survival Song</i> |
| | David Sawyer | <i>Panic</i> |
| | Erica Fox | <i>The Dancer Hotoke</i> |
| | Julian Grant | <i>Out of Season</i> |
| | John Woolrich | <i>The Judgement of Paris</i> |
| | John Hawkins | <i>Echoes</i> |
| | Geoff Westley | <i>Travels in the Arctic Circle</i> |
| | Graham Fitkin | <i>Ghosts</i> |
| The Bayliss Programme: | Tod McNeil | <i>Inspector Otto and the Long</i> |
| <i>Haired Bicycle Hooligans</i> | | |

Rosabella Gregory *Melissa's Maelstrom*

Family Matters: Opera in 2 Acts with six composers all writing parts in turn
Helen Chadwick
Mike Enery
Pete Flood
James Olsen
Cheryl Francis Hoad
John Webb

Six Pack – Tête à Tête at the Bridewell Theatre: six short operas – four successful:

Richard Taylor *Waiting for Jack*
Rachel Leach *Jack & Jill*
Julian Grant *Odd Numbers*
John Webb *The Phone Call*

Extraordinary Women - Susannah Self at the Three Horseshoes:

Andrew Lovett *Jackie K*
Susannah Self *Maria Callas*
Hyromania
Less Gentle Art
Michael Christie *Medea*
Avril Andersen *Mary Queen of Scots*

Kipling's Imposters Inverted – A TRIUMPH?

All the above dozen Selections are purely personal opinions about which many will disagree in whole or part. Plainly there are good operas that I have not seen. All in all, the last 60 years has been one of operatic enterprise and excitement. Flops there have been certainly, some monumental but that was inevitable in such a difficult art form.

When historians write about the Second Elizabethan Age or compare it with the Victorian Age – as they will – for Queen Victoria was the only other monarch to reach her Diamond Jubilee – they will be frantically busy writing about all the negative stuff – Decline from Empire, Suez, Winters of Discontent, Three Day Weeks, Thatcher v Scargill, corruption with greedy Bankers and MPs, Rupert Murdoch, the Euro – and so on. I somewhat doubt they will even bother to consider opera as one of the Ages’ lasting achievements – which they most certainly should do.

In “*If*”, Rudyard Kipling wrote about tackling “*those two impostors – Triumph and Disaster – just the same*”. I am not so sure about the even treatment. However, if inverted to Disaster and then Triumph it makes more sense. From the initial disaster of *Gloriana* to so many first class operas appearing during recent times, the word Triumph might be a slight exaggeration – but not too far off the mark. And for my generation – and in many respects we have been a blessed generation – the witnessing of the advance of British opera is just one of the benefits we have received – but an enjoyable one. Indeed a veritable bonus. I know people will say “*He’s in Cloud Cuckoo Land*” – the costs and conservative habits of the Great British Public will prevent many of these works coming to light again. They have a valid point – as of now.

I am an optimist – because the quality, variety and uniquely wrought “*Britishness*” of so many of them are there – it is a question of frequent exposure. And “new” technologies will certainly help this process and we British should be able to capitalise on these developments. We have the technical know-how, the composers, the operatic structure and the language.

But have we the drive and imagination? That is the question.

Stan Meares
Gerrards Cross, 2012

Editor’s Note

Sadly, Stan Meares died before his article on British Opera had been finalised. I have been unable to include in this edited version the many photographs that Stan had planned for his full article but I have tried to do justice to the immense effort that he put into the work during the last few months of his life and I have retained most of his individual and, occasionally, somewhat acerbic style. It is my hope that it will stand as a fitting tribute to his memory.

I also append Stan’s own acknowledgements:

“The Writer’s grateful thanks go to ...

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Four former BMS Editors and Berkeley Medallists Gerald Leach, Brian Blyth Daubney, Rob Barnett and Roger Carpenter for their support and constructive criticisms;

Erica Jeal, Deputy Editor Opera Magazine, for her clearance of my numerous quotes from Opera;”