

Life in the Garden

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On reflection, perhaps the title should be my life in the Garden, having been there for about 40 years, most of them as principal bassoon. Obviously an article such as this is bound to be very subjective, reflecting both the serious and the funny; but now that I look back, the funnier side comes very much to the fore! However, there is no denying that over the years I have been privileged to take part in some very special performances, as well as playing under some really great conductors (yes, there are some!) and of course, with many wonderful singers!

In my first year, I played second to **Archie Camden** and **Bill Waterhouse** (I shall never think of the latter as William). What an experience: I learnt an awful lot from both, despite them being completely different. One thing sticks out in that first year. After a week or so of rehearsing for the world premiere of Tippett's *Midsummer Marriage*, Bill was ill for the first night. In came Archie and sight-read the whole thing magnificently. I had a lot to learn!

I suppose that the big surprise about joining an opera orchestra is the diversity of jobs there are in the house – chorus, ballet dancers, scene-shifters, wardrobe staff, painters, designers, lighting, etc and all rehearsing somewhere or other. Of course at such times as dress rehearsals, tempers can get roused, starting from photographers' shutters clicking, to star singers not singing out properly, and general mishaps (never in the orchestra, of course!). The most dramatic incident, which Bill Waterhouse will also remember, was when we had got about halfway through the dress rehearsal of *The Tales of Hoffmann* and the conductor was, for the want of a better word, sacked! The trouble was that we were performing in English, a language in which he was not very proficient. We were then asked by Sir David Webster, if we would play through the whole opera again with Ted Downes conducting. After a few years, the policy of the house was to perform operas in the original language, but by that time I had acquired a good working knowledge of the basic plots of the repertoire, very useful for example, in *Bartered Bride* (now sung in Czech!). But as they say, Smetana knew which side his bride was bartered!

After I became principal, things went quite

smoothly until we came to *Der Rosenkavalier* with Rudolf Kempe conducting. I ought to mention here that in those days we usually had only about one to four rehearsals for most pieces in the repertoire; often only one if we had done it in the last season or so. There were three rehearsals only for *Der Rosenkavalier*, which is not only very difficult, but lasts about four and a half hours! The orchestra knew the piece pretty well having played it about six months before; but alas, not poor me. I had only played in the off-stage band in the last act, lasting about five minutes – the second bassoon, the third and contra, never! It was the only time in my career that I had a drink during a show. (Afterwards ... well, that was different!) I was in such a twitch about everything I popped over to the "Nag's Head" in the first interval and had a double brandy. When I returned to the pit, I was given a verbal thank-you from Kempe who, being an ex-oboe player, probably understood all my problems. That certainly boosted my morale. Thereafter, I used that opera as a yardstick for my playing: I came to love the piece and found it easier each time we did it!

One very memorable performance was *Fidelio* with Klemperer. What a man: I felt he knew Beethoven personally. His tempi and shaping of the whole piece were superb, and eventually when we came to the finale in C major, he actually stood up and towered over us. He was a very tall man and since we were seated right in front of the conductor, it was quite an electrifying experience!

There was a strange thing about certain conductors making their debut at the ROH; they wanted to alter the seating of the orchestra. This I always found rather selfish, since what may have made the conductor feel more at home, certainly made the players feel uncomfortable. I was always reminded of an ancient Roman historian (I think it was Tiberius, but I may be quite wrong!) who, writing back to his wife, said, "We spend our time reorganising, since this always gives an impression of great efficiency and industry!" Plus ça change ... The most ridiculous arrangement was when Kubelik came as music director for three years. He decided that it would be a good idea to have the woodwind in a row in front of the conductor. So eight music stands were duly put in a line in front of him.

Of course, the players on the end immediately moved their stands towards the centre, so they could see both conductor and music! That was one of the quickest returns to normal seating ever! In fact, the seating of our orchestra was originally laid out by Richard Strauss (according to the late Richard Temple-Savage) when he conducted the first performance of *Der Rosenkavalier* in 1936.

A most notable memory, shared by Bill Waterhouse and I, was Joan Sutherland's first *Lucia di Lammermoor* conducted by the 83-year-old Tullio Serafin. Joan was a member of the company at the time but this was to be a very special performance, and afterwards I remember Bill saying to me, "A star is born!" How right he was. Strangely enough, I also played at her farewell performance. Of course, as the company became more established and started singing all operas in the original language, so the quality of singer was raised: Callas, Tebaldi, Jussi Bjorling (can you believe it?), Gobbi, Nilsson, Domingo, Pavarotti and so on. Renata Scotto was halfway through her first aria when the curtain slowly came down. John Tooley walked onto the stage and told us all that he had received a message that there was a bomb in the house! The first reaction of the audience was to laugh. However, we all duly went outside into Floral Street. It was then that a short, rather plump stage-hand decided to streak, for a bet, from the Nag's Head to the White Lion and back again. What was so funny, was that the very smartly dressed audience watching this, applauded like mad!

After Kubelik, came ten years of Solti and it was during his reign that the ROH became more universally regarded amongst the established companies of the world and the musical standard started its climb to universal approval. When Solti left, he was succeeded by Colin Davis with whom we did quite a lot of very good recordings and concerts, and who took us on several exciting foreign tours; with trips to Korea and Japan, a swap with the Scala, and three weeks in Los Angeles. But although nearly all the orchestras go abroad nowadays, with us

there was one important difference. We were not only fairly static, but we had a lot of time off. **Melbon Mackie** and I shared the performances, of which there were about twenty – not much for about six weeks. Plenty of time for sightseeing, etc. Latterly we have had Bernard Haitink who did such a lot to raise the standard and morale of the orchestra. He also managed to survive the closure of the House. By then I had retired.

Probably the most historic thing we did was to play at the Prince of Wales' and Lady Diana's wedding at St Paul's Cathedral. It has been a great shame that it all went wrong (because the TV and video royalties dried up!).

Round about this time we did a production of *Boris Godunov* in Mussorgsky's original form conducted by Claudio Abbado. Instead of the opening with two unison bassoons, he asked me if I could memorise the passage and play it in the dark! Quite eerie, it was said; then to cap it all, the last half dozen bars were faded to a black-out.

A lot of changes took place during my 40 years: the orchestra increased in size from about 72 to 126; there were many more rehearsals, which improved the standard of performance; the orchestra started doing more concerts. However, I think Stella Chitty, who was the opera Stage Manager during my time, best described the difference between the early days and now. She said, "Forty years ago, if you wanted something done, you stopped the appropriate person in the corridor and said, 'Could you do so, please John?' and it would be done. Nowadays you put it in writing, in triplicate!" (The birth of a monolith?)

I have thoroughly enjoyed my life at the Garden; it beats working for a living! Now, I do not miss the playing so much as the delightful colleagues I was working with for such a long time. I hope they will be as happy after forty years as I am.

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