

Dear Friends,

Now well into lockdown, still challenging in spite of some recent improvements, many of us are managing to find creative and reasonably successful ways of coping with imposed restrictions and significant limitations to our familiar patterns of life. Time for getting on with all those neglected jobs in the house and garden has been an undoubted bonus for some, as well as the opportunity to explore new activities, online learning and the huge explosion of technology-based entertainment and social engagement. All well and good – but I'd do a lot to get a decent hair cut right now!

Earlier this month (16 May) most of you will have received an email from Nikki, reporting on a recent committee meeting and the various options under discussion for next season (also posted on our website). You will appreciate how difficult it is to be certain about anything at present, but we have sufficient flexibility in our planning and we are keeping ourselves well placed to take advantage of whatever opportunities may be open to us as the season unfolds. We will of course keep you informed of any significant developments, including the impact on subscriptions if we are unable to offer a full programme of concerts and rehearsals.

Meanwhile, we hope that Corona Chronicle is going some way towards helping us to stay connected. This issue gets off to a good start with **Michael's account of the highs and lows of a Musical Director in lockdown** and the first two contributions to our Desert Island Discs series – thanks to **Pauline Rogers** and Concert Manager **Frances Pyatt**, who insisted on two lists to reflect her multi-faceted engagement with music and even suggested that she might be prepared to visit the island more than once, preferably two or three weeks out from a forthcoming WPS concert!

As well as more of your Desert Island Discs, it would be nice to build up a few more tales of life in lockdown, together with any new activities you have discovered and think others might also enjoy. Don't forget that our Facebook page is a great place to share all kinds of stuff as well <https://www.facebook.com/groups/625783124932009/>

If you haven't already participated in one of our Monday evening Zoom rehearsals, it's not too late to join. Just check our website for rehearsal tracks and copies of the selected sheet music and then follow the links – also emailed out by Nikki each week.

And since everyone has become suddenly conscious of the background to their Zoom images, bookshelves being very much the preferred choice, here's a selection of carefully arranged titles sent to me by several of our members!

**Keep well and stay safe,
Judy**



Themes and Variations (1) Michael's life in lockdown

My last official gig seems an awfully long time ago. On the 16th of March I accompanied the Choral Scholars of Saint Martin in the Fields at a lunchtime performance in St. Stephens, Walbrook. After the performance I was approached to see if I might give a lunchtime recital there the following day as the performer due to play had pulled out. As I had the *Goldberg Variations* under my fingers I was more than happy to help. The following day I got a call while on my way into London to say the recital had been cancelled. What to do? There I was walking around central London with a recital up my sleeve and no one to perform to! I decided to perform anyway and made my way to St Pancras station and played the *Variations* to the passing public on one of the honkytonk pianos. That was months ago now.

At first the lockdown seemed like a blessing in disguise. As a self-employed musician you take the work where you can get it and as any gig can be your last, having a full diary is good news. But I had been feeling the strain of a tough schedule and the thought of an extended break was an attractive one.

I soon became concerned about my choirs. What impact would a lack of choir practices have, especially over an extended period? I was becoming anxious about the future of my choirs. A long period of inaction is always bad for a choir and an extended break could be catastrophic.

The synagogue that Gwendolen and I belong to started running services over Zoom and Gwendolen suggested this would be a good way to keep rehearsals going with my choirs. It took quite a lot of convincing on my part. How can you possibly run a rehearsal where the conductor can't hear the choir? After quite a bit of practising with my camcorder I was able to come up with something that resembled some sort of choir rehearsal. Let's be honest here, it's not really a rehearsal. But it does allow us to be together as a community and to do the thing which we all love which is to make music. From my point of view, I love the fact that we are able to get together once a week and see each other. It may not be terribly musical, but it does enable us to maintain the many other benefits of being in a choir. I do miss performing and my work now is almost entirely administration, but I consider myself extremely lucky that at least I have this work.

This period has been strangely special for me as well. For the first time I've been able to spend time - real time - with my family. I've been able to be there at bedtime almost every night, reading stories and tucking my boys in. We've been able to eat our meals together as a family, something that previously would only happen once or twice a week. The home education has meant sitting down with Daniel most days and helping him face his maths and English problems. It's been hard work, frustrating at times, but also wonderful to have had this opportunity to be with my family.

I miss making music! I am finding some time each day to compose and I try to learn a new *etude* on the guitar. But I know one day before long we will be singing together again, and it will be the sweetest moment of all.

Ed. Heartily endorse this last sentence – and loving the thought of Michael playing the piano on St Pancras station!

And (2), from soprano Sheila Malin, looking *Over the Rainbow*

Somehow over the airwaves we still sing.
We can't hear anybody – maybe that's no bad thing.

Sometime soon in the future we'll all meet,
Get to sing altogether – that will be such a treat!

We dust and scrub and clean the room
We're getting awf'ly good at Zoom.....well maybe!
We dig and weed and cut the grass
Will isolation never pass before we go crazy?

Somewhere there'll be an answer we'll all pray;
Then we'll be all together singing our hearts away!



Here is impressively fit looking Alto member, **Sarah Lockwood**, who says 'Hi Choir friends!

I've recently qualified as a Pilates Instructor, and as we've got at least 2 months until gyms re-open, I've started teaching Pilates online.

Pilates is great for strengthening and toning your muscles; it's also great for singers because of the emphasis on posture and breathing.

Everyone is welcome, whether you've been doing Pilates for years or giving it a try for the first time. You can see class times and details on my Pilates Facebook page [Activ8 Pilates](#). If you'd like to try a class, just message me.' activ8pilates@gmail.com

Special introductory offer: 4 classes for £25 (valid until 31st May 2020)

Desert Island Discs (1) Alto member, Pauline Rogers

No.	Choice	Reason
1.	Mozart, <i>Turkish March (Rondo alla Turca)</i> Piano Sonata no 11 K331 3 rd movement	As a child, we had music students living with us and one year they put on a concert at our church. This piece caught my imagination and I spent many hours listening to the pianist practising it.
2.	Dvorak, Symphony No 9 in E minor, <i>From the New World</i> , Op 95, B178	My sister was several years older than me and took me to my first live orchestral concert at the Royal Festival Hall. This was one of the works on the programme and hearing it live completely blew me away.
3.	Gilbert & Sullivan, <i>Iolanthe</i>	My sister's school put on a production of <i>Iolanthe</i> when I was about 10 years old. Our very own Terry Edwards sang one of the main parts! Ed. Wow – wonder if he remembers?
4.	Faure, <i>Requiem</i>	I was just 12 years old when I sang this in a school performance. It was my first introduction to the joy of bringing a big choral work to life and the Pie Jesu has been my tingle factor music ever since.
5.	Britten, <i>A Ceremony of Carols</i>	As a pupil in the junior department of Trinity College of Music, I sang this piece with the choir. We were invited to perform part of it on ITV, hosted by Steve Race.
6.	Widor, <i>Toccata</i> from Symphony for Organ No 5	This was my mother's favourite. I will never forget seeing her absolutely spellbound, hearing our church organist practising it for a wedding.
7.	Poulenc, Organ Concerto in G minor, Op 36	I first heard this played by Gillian Weir on TV at the Last Night of the Proms and was totally captivated. I last heard it live at the Festival Hall in January.
8.	<i>Love came down at Christmas</i>	A Christmas carol with words by Christina Rossetti to the simple 8 bar tune <i>Hermitage</i> by Reginald Owen Morris. This is another of my tingle factor pieces, starting in B minor and ending in the relative major key of D.

Desert Island Discs (2) Frances Pyatt

First visit (classical mood)	Second visit (mellow and reflective)
Brahms, <i>Intermezzi 117 no 1</i> Artur Rubinstein	<i>Sierra</i> Boz Scaggs
Schubert, <i>Death and the Maiden</i> Escher String Quartet	<i>Into my Arms</i> Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds
Richard Strauss, <i>Four Last Songs</i> Gundula Janovitz, Herbert von Karajan	<i>Smooth</i> Santana
Richard Strauss, <i>Horn Concert no 2</i> David Pyatt with the Britten Sinfonia & Nicholas Cleobury	<i>Kind of Blue</i> Miles Davis
Francis Poulenc, <i>Gloria</i> Boston Symphony Orchestra	<i>A Love Supreme</i> John Coltrane
Maurice Ravel, <i>Piano Concerto in G major</i> Helene Grimaud	<i>Lay Lady Lay</i> Bob Dylan
Marquez, <i>Danson no 2</i> Simon Bolivar Orchestra, Gustavo Dudamel	<i>At Last</i> Eta James
Johannes Brahms, <i>Ein Deutsches Requiem</i> Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Otto Klemperer	<i>Send in the Clowns</i> Barbra Streisand

Tenor Roger Prangnell's advice to would-be picnickers!

If you go down to the beach today, you mustn't go in a throng.
If you go down to the beach today, you'd better not stay too long.
For PCs are patrolling their beat
With beady eyes that watch every street
To make sure you won't barbeque your picnic.

Everyone who just doesn't care and is antisocial today
By lighting a fire and cooking up food to eat on the beach all day
Beneath the pier where no-one is near,
They'll have no fear till the bobbies appear
And take them off to the clink, which won't be a picnic!

Picnic time is not allowed
While we are in a state of lockdown now in every way.
You'll be caught out unawares
If you should picnic at the seaside today.
Think before you gad about
You must not play and shout;
You really should stop and think,
At six o'clock you may find the foodstore
Is quiet enough to shop,
Because you're tired and you want a drink!

If you go out for a walk today, you'd better go as a pair.
It's lovely down in the woods today, but if you meet others there
To keep your social distance is good
Two metres apart even down in the wood.
Today's the day that you just mustn't have a picnic!

Den Wellham mourns the closure of local businesses

It is with great sadness that I have to mention the loss of a few local businesses around the town.

The bra manufacturer has gone bust. The specialist in submersibles has gone under; the manufacturer of food blenders has gone into liquidation and the dog kennel has had to call in the retrievers. Suppliers of paper for origami enthusiasts have folded; the Heinz factory has been canned as they couldn't ketchup with orders and the tarmac laying company has reached the end of the road. The bakers have run out of dough; the clock manufacturer has had to wind down and the Chinese taken away. The shoe shop proprietor has had to put his foot down and has given his staff the boot, and finally the launderette has been taken to the cleaners.

Finally, in recognition of the postponed '**Night at the Opera**' concert programme for which we would have been rehearsing right now, here is **Part 1 of Graham Wheeler's pocket guide** to the milestones in the history of this great art form. There are lots of great productions currently streaming, enabling many more of us to enjoy superb performances from Covent Garden, the New York Met etc. Do share any that you've found and enjoyed!

Part 2 of Graham's guide to follow next month.

A hop and a skip through the world of opera

Somewhere in the early 1600s the realisation became widespread that music could directly affect the emotions and that stories involving personal relationships could be put on the stage and conveyed to an audience through music. This was a new concept and quite quickly small 'music-dramas' or 'operas' became popular and spread rapidly throughout Italy. A technique of presenting stories set to music was developed: a short, fast moving narrative that explained what was happening and moved the action forward – 'recitative'; then a more extended song which expressed the feelings or reactions of the characters – 'aria'. This technique of recitative and aria went through a number of developments and lasted up to the 19th century.

There was widespread enthusiasm for this new combination of music and drama and lively competition between the major Italian city states. Soon, each city had its own opera house and operatic ensembles – Venice and Rome were the two major centres. But Naples, Milan and Bologna were also very active.

The leading composer for these operas was **Claudio Monteverdi (1567 – 1643)**. Nowadays, he is seen as the founder of the genre and his genius was such that several of his works (like *L'Orfeo* and *The Coronation of Poppea*) are still in the repertoire. Opera began in Italy and Italian was the language.

Very soon, the fashion had spread to other European countries – Paris, Hanover, Dresden and Hamburg were other main centres. Outside Italy, Hamburg was the first to establish an opera house (1678) and it quickly became a centre where ambitious composers wanted to work. Handel, Matheson and Telemann were three such. Of the six composers born in the early 1680s (1681 – 1685), only Bach remained outside the opera house. The other five, Handel, Matheson, Telemann, Scarlatti and Rameau were opera composers.

As so often, the Church did not approve, possibly with good reason. The spectacle of a style of secular music, expressing human earth-bound emotions finding its way into a church service, into divine worship, was not acceptable. Bach had frequent tussles with the Leipzig town council who objected to what they regarded as some of his 'operatic' flourishes. For several hundred years, 'operatic' was a term of disapproval in church circles. Even works as late as the Verdi *Requiem* (1874) had the effect of restarting the debate. Opera remained an indisputably secular and increasingly popular entertainment.

Bach's great contemporary **George Frederick Handel (1685 – 1759)** was unquestionably a composer of opera. He wrote 46 and only later, when audience tastes changed, did he turn to oratorio. As a young man, very talented and ambitious, he migrated to the epicentre, to Venice, to learn his operatic craft. Before coming to London he spent several years in Venice and some in Rome and established himself with several successful productions.

Skip forwards to **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791)**. There was plenty of opera before Mozart, but for those new to opera, the starting place is Mozart and the Mozart opera most people start with is *The Marriage of Figaro*. It is an opera which has everything. There are jokes, mistaken identities and funny, almost farcical situations; there is love which works (Figaro and Susanna); there is love which doesn't (the Count and Countess); there is social comment: this was the first opera which placed a

servant at the centre of the action. Other Mozart operas include *Don Giovanni*, *Idomeneo*, *The Magic Flute*, *Così fan Tutte*.

Gaetano Donizetti (1797 – 1848) was (with Rossini) about the most important opera composer of his time. He wrote about 70 operas, many still in the repertoire. *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *La Fille du Régiment*, *Don Pasquale* are well known examples.

Gioachino Rossini (1792 – 1868) was the other important opera composer of the early 19th century. He wrote 34 operas, many of which remain firmly in the repertoire and are deservedly popular. Among his well known works are *Tancredi*, *William Tell*, *The Barber of Seville*.

Operetta: In the early 19th century opera gradually divided into Grand Opera and Operetta. The light hearted aspects developed into what is now known as Operetta while the passionate, dramatic and serious became Grand Opera. The two composers most associated with the latter were born in the same year, 1813, Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner. These two are regarded as the greatest opera composers – even if their works don't have any jokes.

In Britain the received wisdom is that there were no opera composers after Henry Purcell until Benjamin Britten. This is untrue if we include Operetta. Arguably, one of the greatest among operetta composers (and there were many such as Lehár, Suppé, Johann Strauss, Offenbach) was Arthur Sullivan (1842 – 1900). When he went to study at the Leipzig Conservatoire in 1858, he was hailed as a second Mendelssohn. His collaboration with W. S. Gilbert produced a collection of stage works – operettas – which live to this day. The genre even has its own name “G & S”.

Giuseppe Verdi (1813 – 1901) was one of those great artists that few people really knew. His internal life was a mystery. He was difficult to approach and at times difficult to work with. But he knew what he wanted from the singers and musicians. One of his young assistants was Arturo Toscanini.

His operatic production was immense: he continued to compose into old age. He produced a sequence of great works, most of which continue to be performed. One of his early successes was *Nabucco* from which the famous chorus *Va pensiero* comes. *Rigoletto*, *Il Travatore*, *La Traviata* and many more followed. His last three compositions are all seen as masterpieces – his *Requiem* (1874), and the operas *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893). He wrote 42 operas.

By the time he died in 1901, he was a national figure. Thousands filled the streets of Milan for his funeral, at which the famous chorus *Va pensiero* was sung, conducted by Toscanini. The musical connection continues into our own time: in later years one of the Toscanini's repetiteurs was George Solti and some WPS members will vividly remember, during rehearsal, anecdotes of Solti's insistence on phrasing Verdi's music correctly: “I got it from Toscanini and Toscanini got it from the composer”.

The Verdi tradition was continued by **Giacomo Puccini (1858 – 1924)**. He wrote fewer works but almost all are now standard repertoire. His first real success was *Manon Lescaut*. Thereafter came *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Il Trittico*, *La Fanciulla del West*, *Gianni Schicci*, *Turandot*. Most are regarded as masterpieces. All have memorable arias and the plot development shows a deep understanding of post-Freudian psychology. The way the female characters are portrayed mostly as victims, while some of the men are weak (Pinkerton), or sexual predators (Scarpia) brings the subject matter into the 20th century. Mimi dies of consumption, Tosca throws herself from the ramparts. And famously, Butterfly is betrayed by her foreign lover and commits hari-kari.

Both Puccini, and Verdi in his later works, show the influence of Wagner.

Richard Wagner (1813 – 1883): Wagner's ambition was to combine Greek tragedy with the most intense and dramatic music. Beethoven was his inspiration. He saw his operas as ‘Music Dramas’. He dispensed with the recitative and aria formula and invented his own way of moving the drama forward – the *leitmotiv* or ‘leading motive’. This was a system in which a tune or phrase is used to identify a character or provide psychological insight, or recall ideas or events. The audience hears these phrases (usually in the orchestra) at key points in the drama.

One of Wagner's early successes was *The Flying Dutchman*. Others followed, *Tannhauser* and *Lohengrin*, a medieval story based on the Grail legend. His greatest achievements were *The Ring*, a cycle of four operas, *Tristan and Isolde*, *The Mastersingers* and his final work, *Parsifal*.

He had a concept of music, theatre and drama which he called *Gesamtkunstwerk* which included all the arts of music, drama, stage presentation. It is arguable that of all the great composers, Wagner is the least known, as even music lovers who go to concerts seldom see a live Wagner production. His genius and achievements can only be appreciated live, in the theatre; or at least in a live streaming version. An example: everyone knows *The Ride of the Valkyries*. An orchestral version is a staple of the concert hall. But how many have experienced the thrill of the curtain going up on Act 3 of *Die Walküre*, seeing the rocky mountain top and hearing the wild grandeur of the eight solo sopranos and altos (the Valkyries)? No case to answer!

Georges Bizet (1838 – 1875): It is worth mentioning Bizet's opera *Carmen*, because it is a classic example of opera presenting a topic which is not respectable, not acceptable, the subject of whispers, but which later becomes very ordinary, almost mundane. When it first appeared in 1875 the opera caused a scandal, a huge stir. The explicit sexuality of the wild gypsy Carmen who seduced respectable army officers into falling in love with her was not at all what the respectable opera-going audiences of the time were accustomed to. But nowadays, productions have to work hard to make Carmen's sexual allure convincing to an audience: if it doesn't convince, the opera doesn't work. *Carmen* paved the way in the 20th century to ever more explicit and darker portrayals of human motivation and behaviour.