

Dear Friends,

By the time this newsletter reaches you, we will have just completed our last Monday evening Zoom rehearsal for this season. On average, between 50 and 70 members have tuned in every week to learn and sing through a very varied selection of pieces prepared by Michael, ranging from Palestrina's anthem *Sicut Cervus* to the super-smooth *Fly me to the Moon*. Anyone unable to connect up to the rehearsals can access Michael's YouTube recordings of most of them via our website. A huge thank-you to Michael for all the time, effort and energy he has put into the whole programme and also to Tim Pettigrew for providing the technical support and backup each week.

Our Zoom singing may not always be of the highest quality but one of the real joys of Monday evening has been opening the link at 7.20pm and watching familiar faces check in, one by one, waving and greeting each other as the screens fill up to accommodate them all (see one such screen shot below). It's good to know that our Patron, **Andrew Shore**, has dropped in on the occasional session and has also enjoyed seeing us happily engaged in making music together as best we can. I'm delighted that he and Patron **David Pyatt** have both agreed to contribute to this issue of Corona Chronicle – their pieces make great reading and I'm sure we all share a fervent hope that they and every one of our amazing professional musicians will be able to resume their careers before long.

Our own position regarding concerts and rehearsals for next season is under constant review. The committee is due to meet on 29th June to take stock of the situation and we will advise you of developments as they occur. Whether or not we can meet in any meaningful way later this year remains uncertain but various options are being considered.

I am hoping to produce at least one more issue of Corona Chronicle over the summer break so please keep sending in your contributions – more Desert Island Discs this month from **Rosemary Reed, Mary Ford** and **Nikki Hind**. It would be good to have a few more member profiles/musical autobiographies – a template is included with this mailing if you find yourself looking for inspiration! **Judith Bruni** has sent in a nice piece about the Gerald Hoffnung concerts she remembers as a child and we have the second part of our *Hop and Skip through the World of Opera*, contributed by our resident programme notes supremo, **Graham Wheeler**. I hope you will enjoy them all.

Stay safe and keep in touch.

Judy



From our Patron, Andrew Shore

Back at the beginning of March I was enjoying my fifth week of rehearsals for English National Opera's new production of 'The Marriage of Figaro', all the more fun for being in the company of a lovely young cast which included WPS-favourite Božidar Smiljanić as Figaro. Our First Night on 14th March turned out to be something of a triumph and we all looked forward to a happy run of ten performances. * Two days later we received news that theatres were closing with immediate effect, so that was the end of that. At least we had managed to squeeze in one performance; I have a colleague who spent six weeks rehearsing a show in Amsterdam only to have it cancelled between the Dress Rehearsal and First Night.

So, presented with this unexpected bonus of free time, Fiona and I decided to fill it instructively by visiting as many previously unvisited churches in Herts, Bucks and Oxfordshire as stamina would allow. As it turned out we managed only two before total lockdown arrived, namely St Mary's at Eaton Bray (actually just in Bedfordshire) and St Mary's Ivinghoe, and if you're not already familiar with either of them I heartily recommend a visit. They both contain some of the country's most impressive examples of stiff-leaf stone carvings on the pillar capitals, airily swept sideways around the pillars in a style appropriately known as 'windblown'. As Simon Jenkins says in his guide, 'they represent craftsmanship of outstanding quality', and I'm very glad we took the opportunity to see them.

With no further church visits possible however, I had no alternative but to get on with a job I've long been putting off - sorting through my personal archive of recorded performances and broadcasts accumulated over a period of thirty-five years, and until now only chaotically stored. A daunting and time-consuming business, it was a bit like delving into the unknown, not quite sure what you might find, coming across performances I'd forgotten about or didn't even know I'd done, with always the risk that owing to deterioration the oldest cassette tapes might easily snap on rewinding. (I've had two casualties!)

But the exercise has been worth it for one particularly joyous discovery. In 1986 I sang in an *al fresco* performance of an opera within the beautiful walled garden of Barrow Court near Bristol. The weather was kind to us as we presented this new piece by our superbly talented friend David, now sadly departed, which he had composed for the retirement of a teaching colleague. The words were wittily appropriate, the music eclectic (every style covered from neoclassical Stravinsky to pseudo-Gilbert & Sullivan), and the audience was made up of many friends and acquaintances. Fun and gaiety abounded in that bucolic bower and it's clear from the tape that the performance was much enjoyed. But although I was aware a recording had been made, I had never until now listened beyond the final notes and curtain calls.

The tape had been left running, the microphone open, and as the applause eventually dies and the onlookers begin to get up to stretch their legs, enthusiastically discussing the performance, reminiscing and sharing anecdotes, admiring the garden, thanking their host for such a splendid afternoon, familiar individual voices, (many no longer with us), are distinctly recognisable, their conversation picked up by the microphone as they stroll past. Hearing this for the first time I was completely bowled-over. Those voices from the past, innocently unaware that thirty-four years hence they would be heard afresh by me in quite different circumstances, lifted me out of the current situation and bathed me in a glorious burst of nostalgic sunlight. That tape was a very timely find!

Spirits are high at the moment as a result of our family ZOOM sessions. Who would have thought that lockdown would have the effect of increasing the frequency of our get-togethers? In recent weeks we've had more contact with the family (albeit remotely) than ever we seem to manage under normal conditions. Of course the two grandchildren bring their own distinctive rays of sunshine to the proceedings, and the brightest glow on our horizon at the moment is the expected arrival of a third grandchild in September!

As for music-making, I've been delighted to dip into Michael's online rehearsals and see so many familiar faces singing towards happier times. The folk in our road shared the fun of the VE commemoration (carefully distanced of course) and, bolstered by lashings of tea and homemade cake, we even managed three hearty renditions of 'We'll Meet Again'. And that, of course, is just what we're all looking forward to doing!

Best wishes and see you soon.

Andrew

* You can read a synopsis of this new ENO production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, with Andrew as Dr Bartolo and Bož as Figaro at <https://eno.org/discover-opera/operas/introduction-marriage-figaro/>. See next page for a photograph taken in rehearsal – looks like a really fun production and we very much hope it will be brought back sometime in the future.



Andrew, 4th from left; Bož, 2nd from right

Desert Island Discs (1) Alto member, Mary Ford

No.	Choice	Reason
1.	Beethoven Piano Trio <i>The Archduke</i> Barenboim, Zuckerman, Du Pre	One of the pieces I used to hear as a child when going to sleep – my father playing it on the cello with his friends.
2.	Elgar <i>Cello Concerto</i> Paul Tortelier	I used to accompany my father and remember him calling me to listen to Jacqueline Du Pre when she first performed it on the radio.
3.	The Seekers <i>We shall not be moved</i> Simon & Garfunkel <i>Bridge over troubled water</i>	The whole family (6/7 of us) used to sing along to these tapes in the car when we were going on holiday – I couldn't decide which to include. <i>H'mmmmm (Ed.)</i>
4.	E lucevan le stelle Puccini, <i>Tosca</i>	I heard Placido Domingo sing it live in Aachen with my husband. Domingo was one of his favourite tenors
5.	Hallelujah Chorus Handel, <i>Messiah</i>	This reminds me of the many times I sang with the St Clement Danes choir in the RAF church in The Strand for the annual Commemoration Day.
6.	<i>Je ne regrette rien</i> , Edith Piaf	I love all things French and it would remind me of the many happy times spent at our cottage in France.
7.	Mozart <i>Requiem</i> , especially Agnus Dei	To remind me of the very enjoyable times I have had singing it with WPS and the St Clement Danes choir.
8.	Beethoven Piano Concerto no 5 <i>The Emperor</i>	I heard Myra Hess play this – and once upon a time, I could have made a reasonable attempt at it myself!

Desert Island Discs (2) Nikki Hind

Arvo Part <i>Spiegel im Spiegel</i>
Thomas Tallis <i>Spem in Alium</i>
Gerry Rafferty <i>Baker Street</i>
Melvyn Bragg <i>In Our Time</i> (Every programme!)
George Butterworth <i>The Banks of Green Willow</i>
Edward Elgar <i>The Music Makers</i>
Simon & Garfunkel <i>America</i>
Leonard Bernstein <i>Chichester Psalms</i>

These were all pieces of music that sprang to mind when I started thinking about this. I have returned to them frequently and therefore felt I would enjoy listening to them again and again on the island. While I was checking spellings etc. I found other strong contenders but have stuck with these.

Of course, if like Frances in the last issue, I had another visit to a different island, there would easily be eight more.

And I know I'm cheating with every episode of *In Our Time*. I think they would have to be stored on my luxury object, an iPad with huge memory and everlasting battery. *Might just about be allowed, Nikki! (Ed.)*

Desert Island Discs (3) Soprano member, Rosemary Reed

No.	Choice	Reason
1.	Verdi, <i>Requiem</i>	My all time favourite. I find it uplifting and invigorating and have sung it in the Royal Albert Hall with the Hertfordshire Chorus and with the Really Big Chorus as well as with the Phil on more than one occasion. In 2015, while recovering from a major cancer-related operation on the Lister Hospital, Stevenage, I bet I was the only person for miles around listening to this on my iPod in the wee small hours when I couldn't sleep.
2.	Stravinsky, <i>The Rite of Spring</i>	An unusual choice as far as most people are concerned. I can't remember when I first heard this piece but I love the drama and sinister undertones.
3.	Elgar, <i>Nimrod</i>	Elgar was my father's favourite composer. He often listened to this on a '78' on a really ancient record player, quite loudly, so that wherever you were in the rambling country bungalow I grew up in, you could always hear it.
4.	Dvorak, Symphony No 9 in E minor <i>From the New World</i>	This was my mum's favourite and while my dad was a larger than life character in more ways than one, mum was quiet and unassuming. But she would play this peacefully on a Sunday afternoon after dad had died and she had moved on her own to a small terraced house on the outskirts of Canterbury.
5.	Faure, <i>Requiem</i>	This was my first introduction to full scale choral singing. I took part in a performance of it in Canterbury cathedral in 1975 when the senior choir from my school joined forces with the Kings School and Benenden School. Years later, I shared a house with someone who'd been to Benenden and had been at the concert, though not in the choir. We remembered how the Benenden girls all had skirts the regulation inch above the knees, whereas we from Simon Langton Girls Grammar School had rolled our skirts round the waistband to make them as short as possible while still being decent!
6.	Karl Jenkins <i>The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace</i>	I have to have one piece by Karl Jenkins and I know most of this by heart, having sung it twice with the Phil and also in the Royal Albert Hall with the Really Big Chorus. So, when in 2018 we were asked to learn the final movement off copy, I was word perfect already!
7.	Howard Shore, film score for <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>	The Lord of the Rings is my favourite book. If we are allowed a book choice too, this would be it – or preferably the set of CDs from the BBC Radio 4 series to listen to whilst I knit or do something else crafty to while away the time on my island. <i>I'm sure we can bend the rules and sneak in a CD player for Rosemary! (Ed.)</i>
8.	Moody Blues, <i>Nights in White Satin</i>	This brings back memories of my college days, playing it late in the evening in my tiny study-bedroom in my Hall of Residence.

From our Patron, David Pyatt (Principal Horn with Royal Opera House)

This is an incredibly strange, disturbing and uncomfortable situation for a musician to find himself in. To have gone from working pretty much flat out, travelling the world and constantly playing, adapting, practicing, teaching, worrying (all often on a daily cycle!) to sitting at home for three months - and counting - is the sabbatical I never thought I'd have. As such I am trying, albeit not always successfully, to use the time to its best advantage. Yes, the garden is looking good, yes there is time to cook and do all those household jobs I've been meaning to do for about a decade, but more than that, there is time to reflect. And I wonder how many others are looking at their lives and taking stock?

My normal working week at the Royal Opera House is anything but normal. There is no set pattern of work, no set rehearsal or performance times. The only thing you can guarantee is that the orchestra will be working for 6 hours per day, 6 days per week. At the moment of course, we are working zero hours, but you know what I mean! The biggest difference between my life as it was in the freelance London orchestra scene (LSO and LPO for the last 20 years) and the ROH is not the salary per se (although that was a nice change to not have to worry about sudden cancellations of work and whether the mortgage was going to be serviced that month!) but the realisation of how well musicians can be treated in this country. The London orchestras (LSO, LPO, Philharmonia, RPO) live an extraordinarily hand-to-mouth existence, and whilst that can be incredibly exciting and rewarding, it is undeniably insecure. I wonder how many of my erstwhile colleagues in those orchestras will decide to try for other "income streams", or just call it a day? These are perilous times for musicians, many of whom fall in the gaps of the Chancellor's (highly welcome) rescue packages.

What do I miss from the ROH? The camaraderie, the music, the wonderful singers, the satisfaction of a successful performance, the feeling of being part of something so huge, which you don't get so much on the concert platform. But, as with all jobs, there are the opposites: working 6 foot underground in a dark pit, the ballet (!), the singers (!), the fear of what the evening may bring (playing the horn for the living must be one of the most unpredictable ways in which to do so), and the feeling of being a small cog in something so huge... So you see, musicians are just like anybody else: never really happy!

To sum up, what conclusions do I reach when I look at my life and take stock? Partly it is relief that I'm not starting out on my career now, as I think it's going to be a hard slog for youngsters coming out of college now. Partly gratitude for everything I've been able to do. And it's partly looking forward with hope that we can get back to normal one day. But it's also partly thinking, "If this is even a little bit like retirement, I think I'm going to be really quite good at it!"



View from David's seat in the pit, Royal Opera House

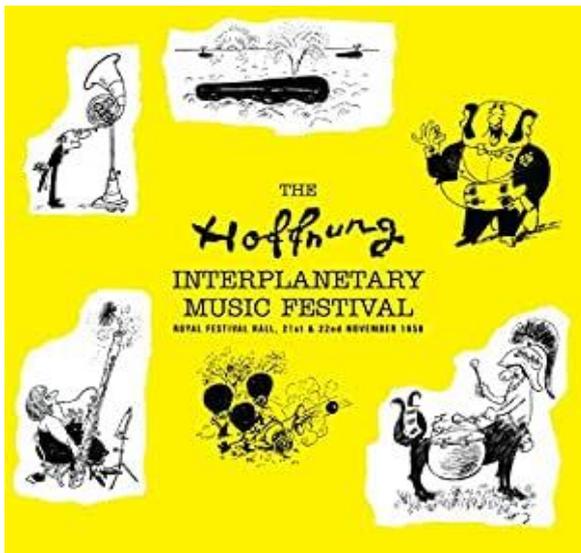
Gerard Hoffnung's Festivals

In 1951, at the Festival of Britain, my parents decided to become members of the Royal Festival Hall, and from time to time they would go to a concert leaving me in the care of a child minder. Occasionally they took me to a concert, which was very special, but concerts I remember vividly were the Hoffnung ones.

It was exciting enough going up to London on the train and crossing over the broad and busy river to enter that huge concrete and glass building and its vast spaces, but to settle down into a concert which had the most extraordinary things happening in it was just wonderful.

The auditorium was clad in wood with prominent boxes along both sides, and the stage seemed to have several tiers. I am sure we attended both music festivals, in 1956 and 1958. Some memories are vague as I was still at primary school and many details evaded me: but I do remember the 1812 Overture played on a triangle, toy drum, recorder and tambourine, also the Malcolm Arnold Grand, Grand Overture for orchestra and vacuum cleaners, which I learnt was dedicated to president Hoover. There was a marching band which kept coming with hundreds of members who got muddled up in the aisles, and a Concerto Populaire in which the soloist insisted on playing the Grieg Piano Concerto while the orchestra played Tchaikovsky. He even played tuba in the Tuba Concerto written by Vaughan Williams. I also remember Donald Swann's version of the surprising Surprise Symphony, and perhaps a typewriter concerto?

I was very startled at one point by the army marching in (redcoats I think) with their muskets, lining up along the back tier of the stage and aiming their guns at the audience. We were told that they would shoot anyone who coughed! So many strange and wonderful things happened and we laughed until the tears fell!



Hoffnung was a gifted artist with a passion for music and all its quirks which he turned into cartoons, and concerts. He was also a raconteur and he told the story of the bricklayer's lament as a speech at the Oxford Union in 1958, where a barrel of bricks was hoisted up to the top of a building with disastrous consequences. I have vivid memories of my very dour grandfather laughing helplessly with tears pouring down his face at this superbly timed performance, and who can forget Hoffnung's letter from a continental hotelier, where 'French widows in every room afforded delightful prospects' and his helpful advice to visitors to London to shake hands with everyone on the Underground and to try the famous echo in the Reading Room at the British

Museum.

He died very suddenly at the age of 34, leaving the music, art and comedy worlds bereft of his huge talent, and the joy he exuded. Fortunately, there were recordings and books of his work we can still enjoy, and I urge you to do so whenever you need the cheer.

His untimely death at the age of 34 left the music, comedy and art worlds bereft of a huge talent, but how fortunate that recordings were made.

Judith Bruni

Elements of Graham's piece which follows would have formed the backbone of his programme notes for our Night at the Opera concert, scheduled for 27th June 2020 and subsequently yet one more casualty of Covid19.

A hop and a skip through the world of opera

This is the second part of the opera tour which tries to make sense of 20th century musical theatre!

After Wagner's death in 1883 music entered a difficult period – all the good ideas had been used up. The conventional diatonic language was exhausted. Wagner's achievements threw a long shadow from which composers felt they must find escape routes. The motto was 'anything as long as it doesn't sound like Wagner'. So music – and opera – took off in a number of new directions: impressionism, serialism, neo-classical, atonal and later, minimalism. The labels don't matter that much, but clearly the musical world was fragmenting. Arguably, the musical 20th century began then.

Grand Opera and Operetta continued to diverge: Operetta crossed the Atlantic, picked up jazz influences and morphed into 'musicals'. Musicals became the dominant form of staged musical entertainment, with lots of dancing as well as singing. Soon musicals filled the role the 'opera' did in Handel's time – popular entertainment which drew large and enthusiastic audiences. The great names include George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Richard Rogers (& Oscar Hammerstein) and later, Andrew Lloyd Webber. There are many others.

Meanwhile Grand Opera continued on its path. The plots became darker and more introverted, the musical language grew more difficult. "Where are the tunes?" people asked. Most major composers wrote operas, many are in the standard repertoire and some are well known. There were a few who made a big impact, notably *Peter Grimes*. If you have only seen one (modern) opera, the chances are that it was *Peter Grimes*.

The split between serious subjects and "entertainment" continued to deepen until there was a sudden convergence when *West Side Story* appeared in 1957. Here was genuine popular entertainment while serious subjects were treated seriously – race relations, gang warfare, social unrest, tragic love.

The following lists a few of the better-known works of the 20th century.

Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918) wrote several operas the best known of which is *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

Benjamin Britten (1913 – 1976). The first production of *Peter Grimes* at Sadler's Wells in 1945 generated a huge interest and established Britten as a major opera composer. The themes are dark – is Grimes a sadist, a child murderer? Or is he a loner, a victim of society's prejudices? It remains one of the most frequently presented operas. In 2013, Britten's centenary, the WPS performed extracts. Other works by Britten which have entered the repertoire include *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Albert Herring*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Apart from opera, one his greatest masterpieces is the *War Requiem*, well known to WPS members.

Richard Strauss (1864 – 1949) was the last of the 'classical' composers, and his death in 1949 marks the end of the golden age of European music, from Bach to Brahms. Probably his most famous opera is *Rosenkavalier* (1911). He had an outstanding gift for melody and it was said that Strauss could set the Munich telephone directory to music and everyone would listen.

Other composers: Bartok, Berg, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Shostakovich, Janacek, Prokofiev, Poulenc among others: all wrote operas which are staged from time to time even Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*.

George Gershwin: Nowadays, Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* is seen more as an opera than as a musical. Initially it was badly received – well to do, middle class New York audiences, and in the 1920s predominantly white, didn't respond well to a story of deprivation in a black tenement. But it soon became, and has remained, a classic.

Leonard Bernstein: Bernstein's *West Side Story* is unique blend of classical, jazz and dance. It is endlessly fascinating music, here some Wagner influence, there a Latin American dance rhythm, here some jokes, there a tragedy.

The 20th and 21st centuries see opera continuing to flourish. To pick a few names, Mark-Antony Turnage's *The Silver Tassie* (2002), and George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* (2012), have all had recent successes. In the case of John Adams' *Nixon in China* (1987), the acclaim has been world-wide. The basic human emotions – love, hate, jealousy, hope, despair... will continue to be presented in a musical setting. As was first discovered in the early 17th century, all these feelings are better expressed, better amplified, in music than in speech, whatever the musical style.

Graham Wheeler