

Richard Strauss Society



**Extracts from Newsletter No 64.
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***Ariadne auf Naxos*, Berlin Staatsoper im Schiller Theater, March 2017** [Michael Fuller].

The present season is flagged as marking the Berlin Staatsoper's farewell to its current base in the city's Schiller Theater. It will be interesting to see whether the company takes this austere, no-frills 'Ariadne' with it when it returns to its home on Unter den Linden. The production is by Hans Neuenfels, whose autobiography (on sale in the foyer at this performance) is titled 'Das Bastardbuch', presumably to flag up his self-identification as a radical. However, there was little that is earth-shattering, or even particularly memorable, about this staging. Costumes are simple: black modern dress for Ariadne and Bacchus, white servants' outfits for the nymphs, brown suits (exchanged at one point for army fatigues) for the harlequinade, suits or uniforms in muted colours for the minor characters. Only Zerbinetta, in a bright red dress, introduces any colour into the proceedings. The set consists of a distressed white box, across which further white screens periodically move.

Joyce and Michael Kennedy Award for Singing Strauss

[Report by Andrew Neill]

This year's Kennedy Strauss Award produced a high standard with the Award being shared between two singers of great potential: a soprano and a baritone.

In the Chair was one of the great experts on Lieder and English Song Graham Johnson, whose knowledge and expertise was shared lightly with the students after the recital and before the announcement of the winners. He also paid tribute to Michael Kennedy whose writings as critic he admired. In particular he praised Michael's ability to criticize without causing offence. Lynne Dawson, the head of vocal studies at the Royal Northern College and Joyce Kennedy were the other judges.

competing were:

Caroline Taylor, soprano

Daniella Sicari, soprano

Lixin Lu, soprano

Kimberley Raw, soprano

Matthew Nuttall, baritone

Fiona Finsbury, soprano

Some of the lieder chosen was original and, at times, daring. The first singer, Caroline Taylor, chose a challenging quartet of songs; from Op. 68 *Ich wollt ein Straußlein binden* and *Säusle, libe Myrtle* and ended with *Wie sollten wir geheim sie halten* from Op. 19. Kimberley Raw, last year's unofficial 'runner up' chose *Beim Schlafengehen* from the Four Last Songs. I am never convinced these work without an orchestra. Wonderful as these songs are it really is impossible to divorce them from Strauss's magical orchestration. Although not the winner in 2016, Raw was recognised by the award of £1,000 but this year, although performing again, was over-looked in favour of the two eventual winners, a decision that was welcomed by most of those with whom I spoke.

Ariadne auf Naxos: Glyndebourne Festival, 7 July 2017

[Review by Michael Fuller]

I had the pleasure of reviewing this production on its first appearance in 2013 (see RSS NL no. 53), and, on the occasion of this first revival, I have little to add to my comments on the staging, which I continue to believe is a milestone in the performance history of this piece. The setting of the action in an English Country House (such as Glyndebourne itself) in the early 1940s, with the prologue depicting the putting-together of a fund-raising event and the Opera proper set in the context of the house's requisition as a hospital, is an ingenious idea which I believe very much goes 'with the grain' of this remarkable opera, adding to rather than diminishing its presentation of music as a 'holy', transfiguring, healing art. These brief notes, then, are simply an appraisal of the performance witnessed in this year's Glyndebourne Festival.

Thomas Allen – the sole member of the 2013 cast to appear in this revival – repeated his weary-yet-warm portrayal of the Music Master, to great effect. Nicholas Folwell portrayed the Haushofmeister: fears that this move to a speaking role might mean that he is retiring as a singer were, thankfully, laid to rest by his biography in the programme. He was a trifle laboured at the outset, but his subsequent, very amusing interactions with Lise Davidsen's Primadonna (who towered over him) were more than compensation. Angela Brower's eager-to-please Composer missed the edginess which some have brought to this part. There were some occasional wayward notes from Michael Laurenz as the Dancing-Master: otherwise, the cameo roles in the Prologue were well taken, notably by Edmund Danon as the Lackey.

Der Rosenkavalier, Cardiff 10 and 17 June 2017

[Review by Huw Dixon]

Der Rosenkavalier has in recent years become the most performed of Strauss' operas, overtaking Salome, Elektra and Ariadne auf Naxos. Putting Rosenkavalier on is a much bigger and more expensive task than the other three, and can only be staged if there is a large audience willing to pay. The production at the WNO was staged three times in Cardiff and although not sold out was certainly full. So the audience did come – I would think at least 4,000 spread over the three nights. I went twice and I was amazed at how good the production was. It was also put on for one night in Birmingham.

First, the orchestra conducted by Tomas Hanus. Strauss himself conducted opera often and he made it quite clear that the most important thing for the conductor is to make sure that the audience can hear the words sung on stage. With the large orchestra deployed by Strauss, this is not always easy (Strauss' own advice was to conduct his operas as if they were fairy music). Tomas Hanus has only recently arrived as the new conductor at WNO and this was the second time I had heard him in opera (the first being the other Strauss in *Der Fliedermaus*). He is a magnificent conductor and was able to bring the score alive either as the backdrop to the events unfolding on stage or when it comes to the fore. The orchestra itself has improved much in the last decade and all sections were up to the challenges of the music. The Waltzes of Act 3 were wonderful, with Hanus coordinating the off stage orchestra with the pit. It is something you cannot appreciate in a recording but have to hear live to fully appreciate Strauss's operatic genius.

Die Frau Ohne Schatten, Berlin Staatsoper, Schiller Theater. 9 April 2017. [Huw Dixon]

There is little doubt that this opera was precious to Strauss: in 1948 he wrote of it “music lovers in particular consider it to be my most important work”. The opera had a problematic birth in post war Europe in 1919 and was rarely performed outside Germany and Austria for another half century. It requires a vast orchestra, six first class singers and is hard to stage. The positive affirmation of human love and the family in a magical setting was at odds with what opera audiences were used to. However, towards the closing decades of the last century it caught on. It is now the fifth most performed of his operas, behind the big four (Rosenkavalier, Salome, Elektra and Ariadne) but ahead of Arabella and Capriccio. There are several excellent and varied DVDs of different productions and many CDs of this opera. I had had the pleasure of seeing this excellent production by Claus Guth at Covent Garden under Pappano in 2014. I was determined to see it again in Berlin. A big pull was the fact that Zubin Mehta was conducting. He has long been a keen Straussian and all round great opera conductor.

Seeing the production for a second time made me realize how absolutely perfect the production by Guth is. It is a fairly minimalist production with nothing much on the stage except for a bed, the odd chair or table. The set consists of a giant semi-circular sound board that reflects the singers voices into the audience and can break up and rotate to move quickly between the different sets. This means most of the opera has the singers mostly towards the front of the stage. However, greater depth is also attained if a gap is created, as when the stone appears. There are usually only the main singers on stage. Exceptions are Falke, a ballerina who really got the birds motions very well, the voice being sung offstage. There is also Keikobad, a Gazelle who hobbles dramatically across the stage with a walking stick and a young Gazelle who is the alter ego of the Empress. Apart from that, the various choruses are off stage: night watchmen, the girls who sing of the magical lover and the babies wanting to come to earth.

Elektra, Deutsche Opera Berlin, 26th October 2017.

[Review by Patrick Shaw]

This was my third visit to this memorable, timeless production by Kirsten Harms from 2007, occasioned largely by a desire to see the two sisters sung by two British singers, Catherine Foster (Elektra) and Allison Oakes (Chrysothemis), both of whom ironically had careers in medicine before they went into opera and both of whom who have largely chosen to build their careers in German Houses.

This was certainly a Straussian casting coup and a half by the Deutsche Oper and one which would surely have amused the composer. The performance was conducted by that eminent Straussian, Ulf Schirmer. The Deutsche had scheduled their own Music Director, Scot Donald Runnicles. However illness prevented him from being in the Orchestra Pit for this ‘Elektra’ and for ‘Der Fliegende Holländer’ on 27.10.2017.

I will not dwell on the felicities of Harms' staging again save to say that for the Singers, it is extremely user friendly' and huge fun to do! No clutter on the stage at all to potentially fall over - only deep, black ash on the floor, a monumental outer Palace wall behind, hiding a

concealed window high up that opens and closes at pivotal moments to tremendous dramatic effect. As can be seen from the photos, much of the power of this production stems from the mixing of old and new - the classically simple monumentality of the sets in which we see the cast all clad in modern dress - short, black cocktail dresses and heels for the maids initially - white moth-like shifts for the final tragic 'dance' scene in which they throw themselves around in the black dirt.

Obituary Sir Jeffrey Philip Tate.

[Editor].

Sir Jeffrey Philip Tate was born on April 28, 1943, in Salisbury and died on June 2, 2017, in Bergamo aged 74 years. Throughout his life he had faced health challenges, being born with spina bifida, and also had kyphosis. He had a long and distinguished career as a conductor, but before that had been an eye surgeon at St Thomas's hospital having read medicine at Cambridge University (1961-64). He was the first person to have the title of Principal conductor at the Royal Opera House (1985-1991) and over his career he held positions in Cologne, Hamburg and elsewhere. His main non-operatic positions were with the English Chamber orchestra as principle conductor from 1985-2000 and the Rotterdam Philharmonic 1991-5 and the Hamburg Symphony orchestra from 2009 until his death.

Tate is perhaps best known amongst Strauss enthusiasts for his classic recording of *Arabella* with Dame Kiri de Kanawa in the title role, with the Royal Opera House orchestra. For many of us, this is the definitive performance to have been made in the UK.

Letter from Cardiff: Strauss and the Sopranos.

[Editor]

It is often said that Strauss had a special affinity for the soprano voice. He was married to a soprano and used to write songs for his wife, as well as performing live with her. Now, I have no doubt that Strauss was able to write expertly for the soprano voice, particularly in his operas. However, I think that the idea has somehow gotten out of hand. He wrote well for the human voice in general and there is a lot of evidence that he was practical in that he was willing to perform and record with different voices and also that the young Strauss was also a fan of the tenor and baritone. Let me explain.

If we look at the lieder Strauss wrote, his "golden period" in terms of sheer productivity and output of his best songs was the two decades 1885 to 1905. Here the evidence is clear that he wrote a lot for male voice. The evidence is in the voice chosen for premier and the voice type he had in mind when composing. Also with whom did he record the songs?

His "debut" in lieder are his Opus 10 songs from 1885, which include *Zueignung* and *Allerseelen*. The singer at the premier was the tenor Rudolf Engelhard. His first recording of *Zueignung* was with the Baritone Heinrich Schlusnuss in 1919. He recorded *Zueignung* at the end of his career twice, in wartime broadcasts from Vienna in 1942: one was with soprano Mara Reining, but the other was with the tenor Anton Dermota.