

Handel at the Barber

Roman holiday:
publicity shot for
the Barber institute's
production of *Agrippina*

The Barber Institute's regular Handel opera productions proved hugely influential – but the tradition had all but dried up. Does this year's show mark a return to form, asks Fiona Clampin

With Handel's music seemingly everywhere in 2009, it is easy to forget that when professional opera productions began at Birmingham's Barber Institute 50 years ago a Handel opera was something of a rarity. And yet thanks to the guiding spirit of Professor Anthony Lewis, a regular series of Handel and other operatic productions was established at the Barber that has influenced many people working in classical music today.

'It was the beginning of the Handel opera revival and I don't suppose as students we realised that putting on a performance of this kind wasn't quite normal!' remembers Elaine Padmore, director of opera at the Royal Opera House, who worked as répétiteur on several productions in the 1960s. 'The Barber operas were absolutely something which set me on my future path. It was my first exposure to professional opera and my first involvement in it. I hadn't even seen very much opera before I went to university. As soon as I got to Birmingham, I started singing in operas myself. Being involved in the Barber operas was an amazing exposure to performances at the highest level. The whole thing for me was an instant lesson in stagecraft, how you made an opera, the high levels of musicianship, of production – everything. I was very fortunate to be involved in quite a big way.'

The Barber Institute sits on the campus at Birmingham and enjoys close links with the university, housing offices, lecture halls and libraries for the art history and music departments. This shared space ensured that many students in the years immediately following the launch of the series in 1959 found themselves working on productions presented on the Barber's baroque-sized stage. In the early days, with Lewis and staff such as Brian Trowell and Nigel Fortune specialising largely in early music, the opera productions were a significant feature of life in Birmingham's music department. Lewis conducted ten of the Barber operas between 1959 and 1968, of which seven were by Handel. Trowell and Fortune prepared the English translations. Lecturer Paul Doe, later professor of music at Exeter, led the orchestra from 1960.

While students may have been mainly on the fringes, the combination of staff and students working with some of the leading professional singers of the day has been a feature of the Barber operas since their instigation. Some students were recruited as dressers, runners and stagehands. French opera specialist Dr Caroline Wood from Hull University recalls lacing Janet Baker into her corset for the trouser role in Handel's *Admeto* (1968), while others such as Dr Michael Waite had walk-on parts in operas such as *Ariodante* (1964) and *Tamerlano* (1962). Students also often took part in the final choruses of operas, which were sung on the steps at the side of the stage. The

lucky few such as Waite, Padmore and Anthony Ford (who went on to work as a lecturer in Hull's music department) were répétiteurs.

Whatever the level of involvement then, students were unlikely to escape the fact that a major operatic production was taking place on their doorstep. 'I think when Anthony Lewis used to do it they basically wiped out the term!' says current Birmingham concerts administrator, Jo Sweet. 'Practically everybody was involved.' Even after Lewis had left the university, the idea of all hands to the pump for the Barber operas continued, according to Eric Taylor who oversaw the day-to-day running of the Barber Institute from 1968 until 1992. His wife Maria remembers many late nights for him, while she and her family – 'anyone with hands and fingers' – helped to prepare food for the after-show party. University staff were asked to accommodate the artists. 'It was done on a shoestring,' she recalls. 'They didn't stay in hotels in those days. Lifelong friendships were formed. Think of the big houses that used to put on operas; it was that kind of family atmosphere, with the whole household coming together.'

Such was their impact, the operas also touched those who were not involved directly. Many students say how wonderful it was in their formative years to come into contact with great artists. 'I remember watching *Imenno* in 1961 and especially *Ariodante* with a young up-and-coming Janet Baker,' says former Birmingham music student Melvin Sutton. 'As well as singing beautifully, (especially the big aria "Dopo note" which received a standing ovation) she acted her heart out! I've harboured a love for Handel operas ever since those days.' Other singers included John Shirley-Quirk, James Bowman, Robert Tear, Heather Harper and Alexander Young.

Birmingham students and audiences were introduced to works such as *Orlando* (1966), *Rodelinda* (1972) and *Giulio Cesare* (1977). These are operas which to today's public probably seem relatively commonplace, but in Lewis' day and subsequently they were an important part of the Handel revival. The sets imitated the sliding panels of Handel's time which, although from Padmore's memory were 'beautifully painted', could be tricky to operate, according to former student Donovan Brown.

'The skill was to coordinate both sides so they travelled in and out at the same speed, and for them not to get stuck or jerk as they slid along the groove,' says Brown. 'I also recall going to London with one of the productions – we were invited to be in the audience for this, and I can remember that we amateur stagehands had a good laugh as the "professionals" really struggled with these panels for the performance.'

Handel is on the programme again as this year's Barber opera – how could it not be, in this anniversary year? The series has by no means concentrated exclu-

sively on his music however. In 1960 the second Barber opera was by Alessandro Scarlatti, and works by composers such as Mozart, Monteverdi, Rameau, Berlioz and Cherubini have all featured. The choices have tended to reflect the specialist areas of research of the Barber professors over the years, with the current incumbent Colin Timms conducting his own edition of *Agrippina* in September.

This will be the first Barber opera for several years. Since the 1970s when the productions stopped being annual, their frequency has dwindled for reasons that are unclear. Jo Sweet feels it is partly explained by the need to raise money to refurbish the hall, a project that began in 2001 and was eventually completed last summer. Opera director John La Bouchardière, however, who himself cut his teeth on productions at the Barber, suggests the series has lacked a driving force.

‘Both the Barber Opera as an event and the academic spin-off were the remnants of earlier times and of staff who had moved on,’ he says. ‘Productions had become very infrequent since the departure of Ivor Keys, mostly, in my view, because there was no champion for the cause rather than because money had become tighter – paintings were still being purchased for the gallery upstairs, after all.’ Returning to direct a Barber opera in 1997 while working as an ENO staff director, La Bouchardière was struck by the limitations of the venue and also how Handel productions had become far more spectacular. ‘The home of the Handel revival remains a postage-stamp of a stage with a tiny pit, no flies and a front curtain so knackered that it was put into storage.

Nevertheless, there is much to be said for Handel without the razzmatazz. Now that most of us have got over panicking about the da capo aria, perhaps some serious, well-sung, well-acted baroque opera, performed without distractions in a fabulous acoustic and with an intimate relationship between stage and audience is exactly what we should be doing.’

The existence of the Barber operas is part of the reason La Bouchardière was drawn to study at Birmingham, and while they may not be such a regular occurrence these days, their impact has been powerful. Clive Timms, now head of opera studies at the Guildhall, describes them as ‘an eye-opener’ for him as a student at Birmingham in the 1960s.

‘I had never seen a Handel or Haydn opera before, or anything of such a standard at such close quarters,’ he remembers. ‘With hindsight I think that my experience of these productions (and also of the entirely student-mounted productions) was instrumental in my choice of career, which has been spent almost entirely in opera.’ Like La Bouchardière, Timms was asked to work on a number of Barber operas many years after he had left the university. Perhaps there will be students at this year’s production, who like so many others before them, will take what they have seen and use it to inspire future audiences for opera and classical music.

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