

Phantoms At The Opera

Opera is booming. It is taking new forms and attracting new audiences and writers. But Fiona Maddocks sees clouds gathering as financial crisis looms

Standing in the foyer crush at a recent first night at Covent Garden, with the red-coated ushers trying, above the din of chinking glasses and braying 'hell-os', to make their final orders for people to take their seats, I suddenly understood why royalty have their own box and their own private entrance.

How glorious, I thought, to go to the opera and remain immune to all those terrible people. With their silly clothes and loud voices, their main object seems to be to secure a prominent post at the interval to knock back their bubbly, seeing and being seen.

What had prompted this dyspeptic reaction, worthy of a virulent opera opponent, but hardly expected from one who loves opera, goes frequently (thanks to a job which provides me with tickets which otherwise I could not afford), and is not even averse to dressing up occasionally or saying the odd 'hello'?

The truth is that nobody with even a vestige of liberal conscience can help but feel some discomfort at the displays of wealth and privilege you see at any of the world's leading opera houses. Matters had been made worse on this occasion by the recent announcement that both main London houses were shortly to put up their top-seat prices: to £82 at the Royal Opera House (ROH) (£98 on special occasions) and a more manageable, but still hefty, £33 at the English National Opera (ENO). Cheaper seats are available, it's true, but they are in short supply.

Opera has never been short of enemies since it was first invented in Italy nearly 400 years ago. There have always been those who have slated it as an expensive luxury, the sport of princes, full of ridi-

culous stories and inaudible words, as far removed from normal human behaviour as you can hope to get. Samuel Johnson's famous dictionary definition of opera, if not the rudest, is certainly the most concise: 'an exotic and irrational entertainment.'

Yet opera also has an unparalleled power to inspire passions across every social boundary, from those who spend a fortune making their annual pilgrimage to Bayreuth or Salzburg to pay homage to Wagner or Mozart, to those who hum the big tunes from *Aida*, *Tosca*, or *Madame Butterfly* at the kitchen sink or in the bath, often without even knowing what they are. Their knowledge may have been picked up from advertisements, or theme tunes, or wherever else classical music is now recycled; but probably not in an opera house. In either case, the listener is responding to the combination of pure melody, heightened drama and the sound of the human voice at its most skilled and expressive, of which all great opera consists.

In Italy, far from being exclusive, opera was always a popular art form. Attended by the count and 'contadino' alike it was the cinema or music hall of earlier centuries. You can still find opera houses in most Italian towns and watch peasant families sitting up in the 'gods' with picnics and bottles of beer, singing along to 'La Donna E Mobile' and weeping *en masse* at the end of *Rigoletto*.

Not having had much of a native opera tradition between Handel and the 20th century, Britain has never quite reached that easy relationship with the form. But now a fundamental change is taking place. Suddenly, everybody's talking about opera.



Opera: Pure melody and heightened drama

More people are going than ever before. More companies exist. More money is spent. There are more grand spectacles like next month's production of *Carmen* at Earl's Court and Pavarotti performing in Docklands. There's more tv opera and records, Verdi t-shirts, Puccini keyrings and cult-of-the-diva nonsense. There is a stylish new monthly magazine, *Opera Now*, and this month, going from strength to strength, there is the London International Opera Festival, now in its fourth year.

Opera has once again become fashionable. And for the first time since Handel, with composers like Britten, Tippett and Birtwhistle, not to mention younger composers such as Mark Anthony Turnage, Britain is fast establishing itself as an international centre of performing and of writing opera.

This is all encouraging. But the issue which remains most sensitive, understandably, is that of money. Nobody can

pretend that opera has ever been cheap. Today, opponents get angry at the large sums of public money given to opera companies at the expense of worthier causes and, seemingly, for the benefit of the few. They blame Covent Garden, in turn, for asking high prices, making it ever more difficult for people who love opera to enjoy it at its best.

But the Royal Opera House is in an impossible position. As Arts Council funding falls, it has to rely ever more on box office returns and corporate money. As Jeremy Isaacs, head of the ROH, has pointed out, Covent Garden is the only place in Britain where you can hear the finest world-class performers. You cannot cut costs and maintain standards. A top star (on the rung beneath Domingo or Pavarotti) earns around £6,000 a night. On the continent they could expect to earn double. Britain has a reputation for paying top musicians low rates - not just in opera - and

Opera On Tour

From Glasgow and Liverpool to Plymouth and Southsea, Britain's leading opera companies are appealing to new audiences with a range of new productions. Our guide shows the main venues and dates to watch for this month.

The **Royal Opera House**, Covent Garden, London, presents Britten's *Albert Herring* (May 1, 4, 9, 12, 17, 23, 7.30pm) and Puccini's *Turandot* (May 8, 11, 13, 16, 19, 24, 26, 7.30pm).

At the London Coliseum, St Martin's Lane, **English National Opera** presents *Don Giovanni* (May 5, 10, 18, 27, 7pm) and a new production of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* (May 3, 6, 9, 12, 17, 20, 23, 26, 7.30pm).

Kent Opera performs Britten's *Peter Grimes*, Beethoven's *Fidelio* and Monteverdi's *The Return Of Ulysses* at the Marlowe Theatre Canterbury (May 2-6) the Congress Theatre, Eastbourne (May 9-13), the Theatre Royal, Plymouth (May 16-20) and the King's Theatre, Southsea (May 25-27).

Opera North tours with *The Marriage Of Figaro* (Grand Theatre, Leeds, June 6); *New Theatre*, Hull, May 23) and Massenet's *Manon* (Grand Theatre, Leeds, May 5, 11, 13; *New Theatre* Hull, May 25).

Scottish Opera's production of Verdi's *La Traviata* is playing in Glasgow (April 25, 29; May 5, 26) and moves to the Theatre Royal, Newcastle and the Empire Theatre, Liverpool in June. A new production of Kurt Weill's *Street Scene* opens in Glasgow on May 23.

Welsh National Opera is currently touring with Verdi's *La Traviata* (Treorchy, April 28; Port Talbot, May 2; Aberystwyth, May 5, 6).

Opera 80 is currently performing Mozart's *The Marriage Of Figaro* and Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. They end their national tour in May at the Theatre Royal, Lincoln (May 2-6) and the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester (May 9-13).

The fourth **London International Opera Festival** takes place from May 16 - June 29. Details from International Opera Festival, 78 Neal St, London WC2.



it is inconceivable that the ROH could get away with spending less than it does already. Even without the stars, you have to pay for conductor, set, costumes, props, musicians and so on.

Meanwhile ENO, rightly praised for its inventive productions and excellent home-grown singers, is also watching its Arts Council grant dwindle away. If anything, it needs it more than Covent Garden if it is to foster its taste for adventure and its boast - accurate enough - that you can have a night out at the Coliseum for the same price as going to the cinema. So the more public funding is reduced, the more reliant will the major houses become on conservative private sponsors, and the more moribund and exclusive the whole opera business will become.

But if you look beyond the two main London opera houses to the country at large, you see where the real change is happening. The listings in one newspaper last month

named 20 opera productions taking place within one week round the country. These were not only from the excellent and innovative regional companies (Scottish Opera, Welsh National Opera, Kent Opera and Opera North) but from small, independent groups in places such as Scunthorpe, Bromley and Milton Keynes.

For in the past decade, since the birth of London Sinfonietta Opera Factory, Opera 80, Travelling Opera and dozens of other small-scale, low-budget companies, a new audience has been found. These are the new opera-goers who have never had access to opera before. In leisure centres, church halls or converted cinemas such companies perform to people who aren't seeking champagne and the glamour of the bar. Here the chorus may number no more than half a dozen, the orchestra may be reduced, or replaced by a piano, the sets and props run to no more than a black backdrop and a couple

of chairs. These audiences experience opera at its freshest and most intimate.

But even on this small scale opera is still costly. Opera Shop, a company founded last year to perform chamber works with young casts, estimate that a two-week stint in Edinburgh, paying minimum Equity and Musicians Union rates, will cost nearly £100,000.

As Arts Council money disappears and private sponsors stick to safe, guaranteed choices, opera clearly needs both kinds of audience for its survival. It's more likely to be the wealthy opera-goer with a passion for opera who pays for the small adventurous companies out of which new audiences and talent is nurtured, whether as singers, conductors or composers. A new dawn of the private patron may well be nigh. Perhaps this is where the future of opera lies if it is to flourish for the many, rather than mummify gloriously under the gaze of the fortunate few. •