

ADVENTURES WITH MY BATON

Returning to Sydney after a two year sabbatical, conductor

Carolyn Watson shares some of her adventures

Leaving Australia at the end of 2008 with a suitcase and a box of scores, I set off for Europe's greener pastures. Being December, there was nothing green about pastures anywhere. However in metaphorical terms, it was the age-old artistic allure of Europe which once again captivated my interest.

First port of call was Florence, Italy, where I immersed myself in study of the Italian language, opera, art, architecture and most importantly, fine food and wine. Sharing a house with an amiable retired lady who didn't speak any English I quickly developed a reasonable degree of proficiency in Italian. It was not all plain sailing however, and our friendship almost came to an abrupt halt one evening during dinner negotiations. Responding that 'No, I wasn't a vegetarian and yes I enjoyed eating meat', caused an unexpected degree of shock and concern. Rather confusingly for the beginning student of Italian, the word for meat, *carne*, is remarkably similar to that meaning dogs, *cani*, and I had in fact confidently announced my intention to devour her two pet pooches.

Following Florence I visited Bulgaria where I travelled to Bourgas, a sea port located on the Black Sea that cannot really lay claim to very much else. Being involved in a production of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* with the Bulgarian State Opera was a wonderful experience and something I will not quickly forget. The same can be said of on-stage events during Act 3 of opening night. Following the ridiculous revelations regarding Figaro's parentage in the sextet, the mood of the opera again turns sombre with the arrival of the Countess who laments her unhappy marriage. She enters an empty stage in search of her maid and confidant, Susanna, with the line '*E Susanna non vien*' – and Susanna hasn't come.

At precisely this moment an apparently lost and frightened cat cavorted onto the stage from the wings. Obviously startled by the lights, this poor pussy ran to and fro across the stage to not-so-veiled laughter from the audience. I had spent hours pouring over the possible permutations in this notoriously tricky accompanied recitative, but this was one difficulty I had not reckoned with! I was reminded of something James

Lockhart, a former conducting teacher and mentor of mine once said – 'In opera you always know something is going to go wrong. You just never know *where*.' And in this case I would add 'or what'!

As the recipient of the Nelly Apt Scholarship, formerly awarded to the Young Australian Conductor of the Year, I then spent a period of residency at the Israeli National Opera in Tel Aviv where I assisted on a production of *Carmen*. Enjoying the sunshine, life and vibrancy of Tel Aviv, I was reminded very much of Sydney ex-



cept for the fact one is unable to read anything and as a result every trip to the supermarket yields a variety of unexpected treasures. Also I am fairly sure Tel Aviv is one of the only places in the world where bags are checked prior to *entering* a shop!

Opera is quintessentially a dramatic art form, but circumstances surrounding the opening week of *Carmen* provided more excitement than even the most hardened professionals could reasonably expect. My personal pride and joy, the revamped children's chorus in the final act was unfortunately cut due to Israeli Child Protection legislation which said it was past the kiddies' bedtime – quite literally, and they were sent home following Act 1! This was a fabulously flamboyant production so it

was also a pity when Carmen's horse allergy meant the smugglers' donkeys and the horses were retired to their stables. At least that was the official reason given – Horse no 1 appeared a little nervous during opening night and unfortunately gave another lasting performance of his own as he departed ...

Later that summer I returned to Hungary where during the late 1990s I spent two years as a Hungarian Government Scholar, studying at the Liszt Academy in Budapest and at the Kodály Institute in Keszthely. After Bulgaria and Israel it was a relative luxury to be in a country where I had a degree of understanding of what was going on around me. Feted as one of the world's most difficult languages, Hungarian is a member of the Finno-Ugric family with its closest linguistic relatives being Finnish and Estonian. Fortunately the libretto of Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* is a fairly straightforward and succinct one – it was nonetheless a challenge to present it in the vernacular in performance at the International Bartók Festival in Szombathely under the supervision of Peter Eötvös, a pre-eminent Hungarian conductor and composer.

With my Hungarian proficiency most at ease ordering in restaurants, buying train tickets and announcing bar numbers, the finer nuances of Beethoven, which I subsequently worked on with the Duna Symphony Orchestra in Budapest were also to prove a challenge. Racking the recesses of my memory a recollection of the words *here, there, more, less, short, long* was to prove invaluable. Aside from the obvious application to specifics of dynamics and articulation, this vocabulary was indispensable at the hairdresser's later that afternoon.

Not quite to the standard of my Hungarian is my knowledge of Czech which is limited to '*dva pivo prosim*', a phrase I am yet to come across in the operas of Janáček. Fortunately the production of *The Cunning Little Vixen* that I worked on with Sir Charles Mackerras was an English language version. Despite this however, preparation was not as straight-forward as it perhaps sounds for there are no less than five accepted and commonly performed English translations of the *Vixen* libretto. It seemed the further I looked,

the more versions I found! Incidentally, my Czech phrase did come in handy later in the year when I was asked to step in as a replacement guest conductor with the North Czech Philharmonic during their summer series. Central Europe can be stifling hot in summer and so it was during July – nothing quite like a 38 degree day in a non-air-conditioned theatre to awaken one’s need for those dva pivo!

Awarded the Sir Charles Mackerras Conducting Prize via the Australian Music Foundation in London, I was most privileged to be able to collaborate with Sir Charles on his last two productions – Janáček’s *The Cunning Little Vixen* at The Royal Opera, Covent Garden and *Così fan tutti* for Glyndebourne Festival Opera. Following Sir Charles’s *Vixen* was a return trip to Israel for a masterclass with Yoel Levi, Principal Guest Conductor of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, and a concert with the Israel Stage Orchestra, a young orchestra largely comprising Russian immigrants. Working with the Stage Orchestra was a very positive experience and I enjoyed a wonderful rapport with the players. This may in part be again explained by my linguistic limitations meaning it was necessary to describe most things as ‘tov’ or good.

No European sabbatical would be complete without a period spent in Germany, and so it was for me. As the winner of Opera Australia’s Bayreuth Opera Award in 2009 I was able to undertake advanced opera study in Germany, electing to spend periods in residence with Simone Young at the Hamburg Staatsoper and Daniel Barenboim at the Berlin Staatsoper in 2009 and 2010 respectively. I was present for Simone’s *Siegfried* and Barenboim’s *Rheingold* – a segue I appreciated, albeit in the reverse order!

In Hamburg I was involved in most facets of the production process including orchestral rehearsals, staging rehearsals and vocal coaching sessions right through to the *Generalprobe* or dress rehearsal, an epic, at almost six hours length! Among particularly noteworthy memories was the staging rehearsal with the understudy for the Forest Bird who was so intent on perfect diction and all things vocal she neglected to notice her paper bird prop was in fact, flying backwards for the entire scene. Similarly Siegfried’s forest horn added some percussion to Wagner’s score when, during a particularly poignant horn call, the instrument promptly fell apart with one half dropping loudly to the floor!

In March 2010, it was an honour to be selected to work with the players of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in *Interac-*



tion 2010, a unique training and mentoring opportunity for emerging young conductors. The concept is an original one, in that it is the experienced orchestral players, rather than any conductor or conducting teacher, who mentor and guide the conductors. From DVD pre-selection ten young conductors from a variety of European countries, Asia, North and South America and myself were invited to live auditions in Berlin with the Brandenburg Symphony Orchestra.

Fortunate to be one of the four young conductors chosen to work with these elite players, my initial joy was soon tempered by the reality of the situation in which all sessions were before a public audience. Add to that the ensemble with whom we worked was the appropriately named *Critical Orchestra* – an ensemble comprising the players of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Staatskapelle Berlin and Staatskapelle Dresden – these musicians had played under the likes of Kleiber, Karajan, Masur, Maazel, Haitink, Chailly,

Rattle etc. and had very clear ideas about what they wanted and expected from conductors, making for quite an intense few days indeed! I’m not sure how often over the course of the workshop I was about to give an upbeat when I was interrupted by the phrase ‘Aber Frau Watson ...’ coming from the back of the violin section!

Such experiences alongside many more like them, will remain with me for years ahead. Now if only the same could be said for that box of scores I shipped from Israel...

Carolyn Watson is an Australian conductor and music educator. Currently Conductor-in-Residence at the Sydney Conservatorium High School, she will also conduct the Willoughby Symphony Orchestra and the SBS Youth Orchestra in concerts during March and April. For more information please see: www.carolyn-watson.com