

Total Eclipse

When I was studying in England in 1958, I saw an advertisement for singers to audition for the Philharmonia Chorus. A distant cousin had told me she was in it, and without hearing me sing but knowing that in Hobart I had done some ‘kawral’ singing, she suggested I audition for the famous choir. Nothing to lose, I thought, so I did.

She told me that the chorus master, Wilhelm Pitz, held auditions prior to Thursday rehearsals in the Mahatma Ghandi Hall, Fitzroy Square W 1 – and to just turn up with an audition piece. I chose the tenor aria ‘Total Eclipse’, from Handel’s *Samson*, because (a) it was easy, (b) it was short, (c) it only went up to a top G, and (d) you could ham it up easily with sobs and gasps as Samson lamented that he’d been struck blind.

I variously sobbed and bellowed Samson’s agony to Pitz, a tubby little man with a thick German accent. He then had me singing scales to test my range. Fortunately, he sang loudly with me, thus covering my distinctly creaky top end. He pronounced: ‘Vorst tenor.’ Eh? Was I that bad? He explained. ‘You sing with vorst tenor.’ Ah, *first*, not worst – me a first tenor, that’s a surprise. I later learned from another other pushed-up baritone that his policy was to shove the odd pushed-up baritone into the first tenors to add weight to the line.

The choir was currently rehearsing for *Belshazzar’s Feast*, to be recorded for EMI in a month, the composer William Walton conducting. Pitz’s training was a revelation: the attention to detail, tone quality, attack... not at all like my experience with the Hobart Choral Society. At one rehearsal, Walter Legge, who owned the Philharmonia and was Elizabeth Schwarzkopf’s husband, outlined the programme for the near future: *Lucia da Lammermoor* was next, with Maria Callas in the total role, Tulio Serafin conducting, then we were all to go to the Lucerne Festival for *The Messiah*, Beecham conducting – and no scores. *Messiah* was to be done from memory.

I couldn’t believe it. Me, a greenhorn from the very amateur Hobart Choral Society, singing *Belshazzar*, in London, under the baton of the composer himself? And *Messiah*, at the Lucerne Festival, under the idolised, immortalised, Sir Thomas?

I have to admit that recording *Belshazzar* was long and tedious. We’d do about five minutes, Walton, Pitz and Legge would disappear to hear the replay. Nine times out of ten, Walton would mount the podium and say in a dry voice, ‘Bar 59, please’, or whatever bar. No comment about what didn’t satisfy. When the final take was satisfactory, Walton said: ‘Thank you all very much, especially you, choir. I think you are probably the best choir in the world.’

The *Lucia* recording a month later was much more interesting, because the work is mostly with the soloists and we had front row seats at the opera, as it were. Like most of the EMI recordings,

it took place in the Kingsway Hall, a smallish concert hall but with just the right acoustics, Legge said. They certainly were.

The sheer physical power of the singers was orgasmic, especially in the famous sextet, *Chi me frena in tal momento*: You could lean right into the sound without falling over. Callas was slim then, as was the principal baritone, Piero Cappuccilli, a thin little man from which a rich volcano of sound erupted (I saw him years later on television and by then the volume of his body had caught up with that of his voice). The principal tenor was Ferruccio Tagliavini, whose silver trumpet lanced the rafters. He was nearing the end of his career, and rumour had it that Serafin had transposed the whole work down a semitone rather than stress Tagliavini's prized voice, but not having absolute pitch, I couldn't vouch for that – if true, it worked beautifully. We rehearsed every night for a week with an imported Italian chorus master, Roberto Bernaglio, who couldn't speak a word of English and most of us couldn't speak a word of Italian. We just made the same noises that he made.

The Callas-Tagliavini recording was the definitive one for some years, eventually overshadowed by the Sutherland-Pavarotti recording.

Prior to the Lucerne Festival, I joined the Morley Consort, a small choir conducted by a Denys Darlow. He was looking for tenors for a visit to Switzerland by the Morley Consort two weeks before the Lucerne Festival. What a nice coincidence. There was a week's break in between the two sets of performances, so I thought I'd do both and have a tour of Switzerland in between, spending nearly three weeks in beautiful Switzerland.

The first stop of the Morley Consort was Berne, an incredibly lovely and well preserved walled city, where we were performing *The Messiah* in Berne Cathedral, repeated in Winterthur. A young tenor in Darlow's choir, let's call him Fred, was so thrilled with himself, he had posters made advertising – quite incorrectly – that he was a soloist in *The Messiah*. Fred had stuck these posters up in the streets of Berne.

Singer's Gall is a pathology that probably has something to do with the sheer physicality of singing. The singer's instrument is something that springs from the soles of the feet, resounds through the chest cavity, is focused by the throat, rebounds off the palate, and is released into God's air somewhere approaching the top of the head, in the best of them with the extraordinary, personal power I had heard in the *Lucia* soloists. So when singers are good, it is *all* of them that is good – their body, their mind. Their instrument is themselves, not bits of wood and other stuff fashioned by a guy called Stradivarius Bechstein. So being good can go to a singer's head in more ways than one, as it did with Fred – and many others I could think of. After the Darlow concerts, a group of us, not including Fred, spent a week touring the beauty spots of German Switzerland. It was idyllic. The beauty and majesty of the Swiss Alps transcending even Tasmania, I have to admit... but then it was time to go to Lucerne for the Festival.

Previously in Berne I had been doing *Messiah* in a choir with 20 others, and we performed with copies; now it was in a choir of 230 without copies. And there was another big difference we discovered at the final rehearsal; Beecham had made a new orchestration of *Messiah* using a brass band, side drums, cymbals, and other noisy effects that Handel would never have dreamed of if he had taken lysergic acid diethylamide, the work to be completed in a record sprint. A wit in the orchestra dubbed it 'Souza's *Messiah*', Souza being the American composer famous for crass military marches. All the fine nuances that Pitz had taught us were lost in the total mass of huge sonority. He groaned, tears in his eyes, 'I haf come from Düsseldorf effry veek, only to haf my verk ruined by zis man. He should be taken to ze crematorium!' It was hard to disagree.

In the chorus 'He trusted in God', Beecham stopped conducting. He shouted: 'BASSES! *Keep time!*' He then restarted the chorus. Nobody else thought there was anything wrong. The Hallelujah Chorus went with a big bang: breakneck speed, absolute precision, cymbals, drums, trombones, tubas and instructions not to sing but to *shout* the penultimate 'hallelujah!' This brought the audience spontaneously to their feet, cheering and bravoing.

The old attention-getter was 81 at the time. The following year he was in fact taken to ze crematorium, where I have no doubt he, too, went out with a big bang.

The Philharmonia did a series of concerts and recordings over the next two years, with Otto Klemperer as resident conductor. Klemperer, the tired old lecherous giant of European music, hadn't properly recovered from a stroke. He conducted sitting down, with a shaky, batonless hand. As a crescendo loomed, he slowly and unsteadily rose from his chair. Electricity happened; he always communicated what he wanted, even though at rehearsals he rarely said a word. If he was dissatisfied he, like Walton had done, would simply mutter 'Bar 143' and the passage would be repeated until he was satisfied.

Yet this seeming lack of communication, verbal or otherwise, worked. There is a particularly pregnant moment in Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. After the Kyrie's gentle ending with a gentle four-in-the-bar pianissimo, Klemperer would rise like a threatening zombie, his quavering paw fumbling for a throat to strangle, then with the unexpected shock of a terrorist's car-bomb, we were into a raging syncopated, one-in-the-bar, in which each part always entered precisely on cue. Don't ask me how it happened, I can only report what one critic wrote:

It used to be said that the choral writing of Beethoven's 'Missa Solemnis' was designed for angels and that no earthly choir could sing it satisfactorily. This was effectively disproved by the Philharmonia Chorus at the Festival Hall last night....The attack and discipline of the choir were absolutely exemplary.¹

¹ *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 October, 1960.

But to be fair, the comment about the choir was also a reflection of Pitz's training as well as Klemperer's conducting via a seventh sense.

Klemperer's *Messiah* was heavy and stolid, quite unlike the 'authentic', sprightly, transparent versions that are now so popular. What made this *Messiah* so memorable was not Klemperer but one particular soloist. God knows how many times I'd sung *Messiah*, starting in the City Hall, Hobart. One tends, I fear, to become jaded. You sit there in a dream, waiting for the next bit of choral action. So there I was, dreaming ... suddenly an iron claw grabbed my throat. *What?*

It was the tenor soloist, Peter Pears, singing the opening bars of 'Thy rebuke hath broken his heart.'

Pears has a distinctive voice, small and not particularly beautiful, but he performed the artistic ultimate. He made the listener feel so immediately and so intensely, yet he couldn't have been feeling anything like what he was conveying. If he had been, he wouldn't have been able to sing at all. It's a form of alchemy. The singer delivers technique and the listener receives emotion. All the critics singled him out for the highest praise.

Here was the difference between an extremely good singer – all the other soloists were that – and a truly great singer

Carlo Maria Giulini conducted Verdi's *Requiem* – the best opera Verdi ever wrote, as one wit in the choir put it – at a concert in the Royal Festival Hall in June 1960, and at the Edinburgh Festival the following August. I wrote home:

The most gripping concert I have ever sung in. There were moments when it was almost impossible to sing from sheer enthrallment – especially following the trumpets off stage announcing the Tuba Mirum. Then it was as if a herd of wild horses were pounding faster and faster towards the stage. Giulini was like one possessed. We finished singing at 9.30, but were still on stage being cheered at 9.45, a substantial portion of the crowd having mobbed the rostrum calling out 'Giulini' 'Giulini!'

One critic's vote: 'as near perfect as Verdi could have wished.'²

Legge had the idea of recording concert performances of Mozart operas that were released on EMI. Giulini conducted *Don Giovanni* and *Marriage of Figaro*, but the most memorable was a public performance, in the Royal Festival Hall, of Klemperer's *The Magic Flute* with the legendary Nicolai Gedda as a mellifluous Tamino. However, the highlight came not from Klemperer's conducting or from Gedda's singing, brilliant though these were. It was an extraordinary *son et lumière* production

² *The Daily Mail*, 22 August, 1960.

of the Queen of the Night arias, sung by a gorgeously gowned, brilliantly spot-lit Ingeborg Hallstein, beautiful, tiny, whose glittering arcs of sound looped high above the audience, thrillingly precise.

Other performances in the Royal Festival Hall included the annual Beethoven Season under Klemperer, the climax always being Beethoven's Ninth, and *Belshazzar's Feast*, a Royal Command Performance with the Queen Mother in attendance, but I'll bet she was bored rigid.

My time in the Philharmonia was the peak of my musical experiences in London, but I have to mention Southwark Cathedral, which played an important part in my brilliant singing career. This Victorian Gothic building is stuck between London Bridge and Bankside, through grimy twisting alleyways between gaunt warehouses. It is basically unchanged since Dickens' time, but as I wasn't around then I can't vouch for that. The choir later sang the theme music for the Mr. Bean series, as he sprawled flat on the cobblestones, a holy light playing on him.

I went to Matins one Sunday and was impressed, the choir was good and unpretentious. I learned that they had two professional lay clerks for each of alto, tenor and bass, but they took on supernumeraries, who stood in the back and added weight, leaving the solos to the professionals. I made further enquiries. Yes, they could do with another supernumerary tenor. If I was interested, see the organist, Harold Dexter, after Evensong next Tuesday.

Dexter was a tall, blunt North Countryman, dressed in morning suit whatever the time of day: black, frock coat and striped trousers. He wasn't interested in hearing my party piece, 'Total Eclipse', but he was interested in my sight-reading ability. He handed me a Wood anthem I didn't know: 'Sing the tenor line.'

I sang. Behind severe, thick rimless spectacles, Dexter had bulbous eyes. He rolled them. 'It's easy to see you've never had any voice training. Oh well, we'll see how it goes.' He introduced me to the lads.

Afterwards, we repaired to The Anchor, Bankside; and bankside it literally was, the pub being separated from Old Father Thames by an open-air, much-used *pissoir*. The Anchor has a long history going back to the Globe Theatre, a genial host, whose name I forget, and a stunning hostess, whose name I do remember: Jean. She had a cloud of curly, fair hair, huge blue eyes, a lovely face, a low cut sweater whatever the weather (but it was always warm in The Anchor), underneath which was a luscious body Rubens would have killed for to lay down on canvas – before getting around to painting her, that is to say. And Jean could pull a mean pint. The bibulous lay clerks were students at the Guildhall School of Music and a maths teacher, who was able to sight read, in bass or alto, either a very pleasant listen. The other two lay clerks were nondrinkers and disapproved of us.

There were about half a dozen supernumeraries, but it varied from time to time. We filled in for ten bob a service if our corresponding lay clerk was unavailable. We performed Tuesday and

Friday late afternoon and all day Sunday – which worked, because the Philharmonia rehearsed on Thursdays.

Sundays were testing. Of a morning, my voice was at its thickest but the sequence of events on Sundays was increasingly voice-thickening. After singing a full setting of Matins with anthem, we repaired to the George Inn, Southwark, a coaching inn in Dickens' novels. A pint or two later, we had lunch at Guy's Hospital, after which it was time for sung Evensong. A pleasant way of spending a British Sunday in the 1950s.

One of the first rules you learn in singing polyphonic music is: 'forget about the bar lines'. Early composers did not think in bars but in interweaving lines of melody. How do you know when to start your line? You count, from where you last left off. Or to short cut, from where someone else comes in. Miss a count, or if that someone else is wrong, the whole thing is stuffed. One Evensong I was an acting lay clerk, which meant I had the line on my side to myself. Tapping my finger in rhythmical taps, I charged ahead. I was about to deliver the note for the final chord when I was aware of silence. And eyes. I had miscounted a beat. We recessed to the vestry. Dexter, eyes bulging, face purple, strode towards me in long, striped strides.

During a pause in his verbal onslaught, a phrase I'd heard in a film in similar circumstances came to me: 'Flattery will get you nowhere, Mr. Dexter.' Everyone laughed, including, finally, Dexter. I was off the hook, but I'd learned I'd have to think of a better way of keeping track than counting finger taps.

But even that wasn't as big a problem as my voice production. One of the lay clerks, a student at Guildhall School of Music, told me they took part-time students. 'Have a go,' he said, 'and if you get in, ask for Gerhardt.'

'Total Eclipse' stood me in good stead again, and I was lucky enough to get Herr Gerhardt. He was a lovely old guy, who told me lots of things I was doing wrong. He gave me exercises on all the vowels going up and down in arpeggios. My voice freed up, I started to breathe properly and I felt relaxed. Doing exercises, that is. Transferring it to real music, especially the stuff we had at Southwark, was the problem.

It was one I never solved.

Many years later, I joined the Newcastle University Choir. We did some interesting stuff, but time and lack of practice had lowered the *tessitura* of my voice. I was now really struggling to sing tenor. At one rehearsal – we were doing the Bach St Matthew Passion – an old bloke, Trevor, was sitting next to me. I had been admiring the ease and quality of his singing, but he evidently was not admiring the ease and quality of mine. He looked at me, lent his head towards me, listening intently to what was coming out. 'You know,' he said, 'you're not producing your voice properly. You should get lessons.'

But I'd already had my lessons, from the legendary Gerhardt no less. I decided it was time to call it quits. I never went back to the Newcastle choir after that rehearsal. My only worry was that my absence might have made Trevor feel guilty that he had offended me. He hadn't at all. He was absolutely right.

Trevor's advice had reminded me of a story I'd once heard about Charlie Chaplin. He was at a party when he suddenly burst into song.

A friend turned to him: 'Why Charlie, I didn't know you could sing!'

'I can't,' he replied. 'I was only imitating Caruso.'

That's me. I hadn't been singing either. I had only been imitating those who could. It was time my singing career took the name of my party piece.

Total eclipse.