

# Between Cues

The thoughts of  
Walter Plinge

## Audience Assistance

A photograph in the Paris Opera's Benjamin Britten exhibition is captioned *Britten and Pears assistent a la 50me representation D'Albert Herring A L'Opera National*. In the photograph Britten and Pears are not assisting by making music but are assisting by sitting on a box. This traditional French concept of the function of an audience was understood by Glyndebourne's founder John Christie who demanded that his audience arrive on time, remain for all the calls, and dress for the occasion—*Evening dress is not snobbery. Its purpose is to give the audience trouble. We take a great deal of trouble. The public must do the same . . . . We tell our public openly and bluntly 'we want to give you trouble: if you are not prepared to take trouble stay at home'* Christie excelled at his chosen role of a great British eccentric. It helped him to add humanity and humour to an acutely perceptive mind (he daily asked me, intuitively, the very questions that I was anxious to avoid) and it was typical that he should turn a fundamental law of theatre into a materly marketing strategy.

## Fishy Reflections

In these days of high technology theatre I am glad to be reminded by Donald Walker of the electrician whose tool kit included a goldfish trained to create just the right degree of turbulence in the water tray used as a reflective surface in the production of ripple effects.

## Opera du Chatelet

From time to time there is much pleasure to be had from indulging, after a suitably lubricated meal, in the pleasures of flapping canvas, full up lighting, out front singing, and no ensemble nonsense. There was a choice of *Opera Comique* or *Théâtre du Châtelet*. But a few years ago the Opera Comique was disbanded and its Salle Favart designated, as second house of the Opera, to sterner pleasures—frequently atonal. Now the Chatelet has been brought face to face with 20th century staging ideas and techniques, and Paris has acquired a new alternative opera. It is a city rather than a national theatre and, this being the age of arts integration, it is called not Opera de la Ville but *Théâtre Musical de Paris*. With this new organisation occupying the Chatelet, the Paris Civic Music and Drama theatres now face each other across the Place du Chatelet with identical 19th century facades. The drama house, *Théâtre de la Ville* was formed by gutting the traditional furnishings of the *Sarah Bernhardt* theatre to instal a raked black box with end

stage. The Chatelet has retained its original 1862 tiering and spectacularly vaulted gallery. Refurbishing has been restricted to a flexible orchestral pit, modernisation of the stage elevators, renovation of the ventilation, reorganisation of some of the seating, and what the programme rather charmingly calls *amélioration de l'acoustique*. Certainly Bizet's *Pearl Fishers* sounded super. The production had been imported from Bologna and was directed by a distinguished designer who was also credited with the lighting. This was good news for the scenery but hard luck on the singers. (Lighting actors is never easy when solid up and downstage walls combine with a front gauze). A tear or two inevitably must be shed for the passing of the old style Chatelet with its huge traditional painted operettas. But the future looks good with a programme (part imported, part in-house) that within four months includes music theatre by Charpentier, Bizet, Massenet, Cavalli, Vivaldi and Offenbach interspersed with concerts and followed by a season of Ballets Folkloriques. A welcome innovation is that the usherettes are paid by the management and not, as traditional Parisian custom, by the audience. No purses and no predatory palms: there are even printed announcements that cloakrooms are free and that gratuities are strictly forbidden.

## Housing the Arts in Paris . . . .

*Le Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou* is wearing well. Its primary coloured structural tubes no longer have a temporary air: this one-off engineer's fantasy is as important to Parisian ambience as that hymn to metallurgy, the Eiffel Tower. Popularly known as *Beauborg*, the Pompidou Centre has revitalised the surrounding neighbourhood and stimulated its individual character. Curious, however, that its excellent bookshop should stock every art except theatre. Good to find a lot of performing art filling up the hole left by the destruction of nearby Les Halles.

## . . . .and in Edinburgh

On returning from Paris I made my annual inspection of another important hole and can report that the prime site cleared for the proposed, but abandoned, Edinburgh Festival Opera House is continuing to provide a comfortable wild life sanctuary in the lee of the castle. At the 1952 Edinburgh Festival I appeared with the Hamburg State Opera—as a non-singing extra, let me hasten to add. *Why are we not in your Stadt Opernhaus singing?* asked a chorister, observing the difficulties of

inserting *Mastersingers* into the King's Theatre. His response to my reply would be equally apt today—*Ach, So!*

## Organic Light

An organ demonstrator rented my theatre. The seats were free and the house was full. Consoles stretched from pros to pros, keyboards and pedals beaming seductively at the audience. The demonstrator said anyone could play and he demonstrated how. He used one finger for the tune and selected microprocessor programmes to clothe that tune in logical rhythms and harmonies. We applauded and he changed his tune: the accompaniment re-aligned itself automatically and logically. Then he launched into a complex voluntary using all his fingers and all his feet. Aha!, an instrument that anyone can play, yet also an instrument that will respond to a maestro's touch. Just like a good lighting board! could the next step be an organ console that plays light? Just think of the sensitive speed control that would be obtained from an accelerator pedal!



## Inspired Spire

Theatre externals are a problem in an age of structural architecture. *Come hither!* rather than *Enter ye who dare!* should be the proclamation, Decorative treatments are out of fashion, yet escapism continues to be a prime motivation for theatre going. A fly tower may be a poetic statement to those who understand its function: but to the average punter it can promise all the excitement of a bunker. The sails of Sydney Opera House dominate the cityscape and seascape with a promise of excitement within. Unfortunately their form superimposes limitations on the deployment of the space that they enclose. Since a 1976 site visit to Melbourne—when I went public with my admiration—I have followed from afar, with considerable fascination, the building progress of the Victorian Arts Centre. The latest postcard of the model suggests a return of the art of non-functional theatre decoration in a way that is so dramatic that it must also be welcome.