A quarter millenium at Covent Garden

IAIN MACKINTOSH

Air Canada has air-lifted our cover girl to Burlington House. Painted between 1786 and 1789 she had left these shores for New York in 1848 to decline into relative obscurity in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Now she is back and epitomises the celebratory mood of *The Royal Opera House Retrospective 1732–1982*, now showing in the Private Rooms of the Royal Academy, 7 days a week (save for the Christmas holidays) until 6 February 1983.

Mrs Billington made her Covent Garden debut on 13 February 1786 in Bickerstaffe's *Love in a Village*, a ballad opera in the tradition of *The Beggar's Opera* – more a musical of the day in contrast to the more serious Italian Opera which, until early in the nineteenth century, was confined to the King's Theatre in the Haymarket. Mrs Billington was an immediate sensation. A critic reported that she '*at once took the position of the first and best of all stage singers in my time. The pure and flowing melodies of Arne acquired new grace from her execution of them. The majestic movement "In Love should you meet a fine pair" produced an effect which literally haunted the ear. In addition to all this, she was a lovely woman and graceful in all she did.*'

Within the year Reynolds was painting her portrait. He had already completed his *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (Royal Academy 1784). This painting was to be its musical equivalent. The ravishing result was shown in 1789. Everyone loved it except for Haydn who thought the cherubs should have been listening rather than singing themselves; however, even their wicked faces contribute to the painting's sensuality. In the years to come Mrs Billington was to have a picturesque career including marrige to a singing teacher who died in apoplexy in Naples, an engagement at the San Carlo, close friendship with Lady Hamilton, a second French husband and a strange death in 1811, some say beaten to death by the second husband, on her estate near Venice. Reynolds' portrait shows a woman to whom such things could well happen.

Rediscovering Mrs Billington was one of the greatest pleasures in putting this exhibition together. In my partner's miraculous card index there was a smudgy photocopy of a bad photograph of a painting by Reynolds, size unknown. But the card did show where it was; in a small art gallery in a remote town in the Canadian maritimes – the sort of place you fly over rather than to. My Theatre Projects Consultants business taking me often to Toronto I diverted myself to Fredericton in mid June and one wet Monday morning at nine o'clock presented myself at the Gallery. There she was, larger than life, and so now, thanks to a great extent to Air Canada, here she is in the Reynolds Room of the Royal Academy presiding over an exhibition of over 200 items: paintings, engravings, sculpture and photographs.

Another dimension, which makes the return of this picture so appealing, is that she represents the spirit of music and opera despite being painted in the first century of Covent Garden's life when the theatre was primarily a playhouse. Handel was certainly in charge of music in the first years of the theatre's life but this was the product of personality and financial clashes at London's real opera house in the Haymarket rather than evidence of a tradition of serious opera at Covent Garden. The Theatre Royal Covent Garden, (the theatre's title until 1847 when it became the Royal Italian Opera) enjoyed a near monopoly of drama because its founder, John Rich, held one of the two patents granted under Charles II. Rich held the Davenant Patent, used successively at the Duke's Theatre, Dorset Gardens and Covent Garden, while Drury Lane had, since 1663, operated under the Killigrew Patent. The Patents served two purposes: they granted a joint monopoly, which was the next best thing to the subsidy of princely patronage but which ceased to be effective after the liberalising Theatres Act of 1843, and they also set the two theatres apart from all other places of entertainment in granting them their rights direct from the Crown and therefore outside the jurisdiction of any licensing authority. (In this respect the Patents are still valid, hence the fact that 'Item No. 1' in this exhibition is the Davenant Patent, thought lost until recently, now found and here on loan from a private foundation in Philadelphia.)

The illustration on the next page suggests what the first Covent Garden felt like as a theatre in its early years. The year is 1747, the close of the only season for which David Garrick was a member of the Covent Garden company (from Autumn 1747 to Summer 1776 he ran the opposition at Drury Lane). The stage is tiny, the proscenium only 26 feet wide. The scale was not much larger than the Criterion Theatre today although double the number of persons could be, and were, crammed in.

Such literal presentations of actors and audience are rare of Covent Garden as they are of almost all eighteenth-century theatres. But, fortunately for us, the great artists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, painted the great actors, singers and dancers. The immortality of one artist gave a degree of immortality to the other. Thus in this celebratory exhibition the theatrical painter is our Prospero, conjuring up those who have long since melted into air. The reader of CUE who ventures into the Royal Academy will find himself in the greatest Green Room imaginable.

It is difficult to write an appreciation of an exhibition with which one has slept for so long but which at the time of writing (November) has not yet given birth. There is a fully illustrated 144-page catalogue, 20 pages in colour, with both individual entries and also comprehensive essays. Although there is no space here for even a summary it may be worth drawing attention to two