



The sumptuous foyer of the Grand Theatre, Geneva.

with his prolific recordings for Decca after the war, which also rubbed off on the opera house. The late Karl Böhm was among the guest conductors.

The Grand Théâtre itself, set squarely in the middle of one of the city's grander thoroughfares, Place Neuve, is flanked by Musée Rath, an art museum, and the music conservatory — all statuary and graceful curved windows. Across the square are the former city walls, with streets leading up to the old town, or *Vielle Ville*, and the imposing cathedral; and facing the theatre, are Geneva University and the iron gates of the Parc des Bastions, with their crowned imperial eagles looking every bit as grand as the former Russian imperial eagles at St Petersburg. In such a setting, one is reminded of the piquancy, so quaintly English, of setting down the Nation's main opera house in a market garden amid the cabbages and porters. In Geneva, thoughts turn to more historic concepts, like the city's literary forebears, Voltaire, and Rousseau, and to its traditional cultural orientation towards Paris. This was, after all, the French département of Léman, under Napoleon — hence the French for Lake Geneva, Lac Léman.

However, this opera house is no nineteenth-century ornament. Behind the decorated facade and front of house areas, is a completely modern theatre. An oxygen cylinder burst into flames during a rehearsal of *Die Walküre* in 1951, setting fire to the entire interior, and allegedly *melting* the fire curtain. By a miracle, the exterior was saved, including the sumptuous foyer with its heavenly stucco, painted tableaux and ceiling. There were 13 subsequent separate studies to update and improve the theatre's

capabilities, out of which finally emerged a larger stage, more seating, and far greater technical flexibility. Their sheet metal safety curtain, incidentally, may be covered with raised silver and gold leaves, but it is also now 12 cm thick, 2 tons in weight, and can move at a speed of 30 cm (one foot) a second.

Like most nineteenth-century theatres, the Grand Théâtre was more concerned in its original 1875 conception, to provide not so much good sightlines, as to maximize the "social" aspects of an evening at the opera. The atmosphere of the foyer is ample testimony to this. It must have been a grand occasion on opening night, 2 October 1879, with Rossini's *William Tell* chosen as the suitably patriotic inaugural production. Now the sightlines are all good, which is reflected in the pricing structure: there are some cheap seats at £3–£4, but the majority range around £10–£15, with a top of £20.

The dimensions of the post-fire stage enable the Grand Théâtre to borrow productions from such varied and large opera houses as Nancy, Turin, La Scala, Paris and the London Coliseum.

The fly tower rises 30 metres above the proscenium, and is used to fly 35 flats, drapes or whatever, with a maximum weight capacity of 500 kg. There is a movable rear stage on heavy rails, which moves electronically, alongside the main stage. Alternatively, it can move into the same position as the main stage, if the latter is dropped below stage level. Two side stages add further large areas, which if added together, total a larger space than the main stage itself. This is the key to using productions from other, larger, opera houses, because the stage areas correspond

closely.

The main stage comprises five sections, each measuring 2,40 metres by 17 metres, and a sixth measuring 2,80 metres by 17 metres. Each weighs 17 tons, thus bringing the total stage weight to over 100 tons. The six sections are mounted on hydraulic pistons, making them mobile, together or separately. They can drop by 8,67 metres or rise to 2 metres below or above stage level. On top of this stage can be added a revolve, 14,50 metres in diameter, which can turn in either direction at up to two revolutions per minute. Its distributed weight is eight tons. The orchestra pit, likewise, is composed of three lifts, or movable sections, allowing either extra stage space, as required, or variable arrangements of the players. Everything is done by hydraulics.

The lighting box, which, intriguingly is still referred to as *le jeu d'orgue*, or literally, the organ keyboard (remember the old control desks?), is situated in the middle of the Dress Circle. Using 240 circuits for the stage itself, and additional circuits for the pit and the auditorium, the lighting consists of two lots of memories: one ferrite and the other cassette, allowing 600 lighting effects in all. Total power output can run to about 1000 kw for stage and auditorium combined, they say. They use 326 spots of different kinds, and among other effects, three 16 mm projectors for special effects. I noticed too, that two closed-circuit television systems have been installed. One, Mr Duchaine explained, is for co-ordination between front and back stage and the orchestra pit. The other is to allow videotape recordings to take place, from the lighting box just above stage level, of rehearsals and live performances.

The sound box has also been completely re-equipped, with the notable addition of special sound effects, regulated through a system of speakers throughout the auditorium. Obviously this also relays the performance to other parts of the building.

The various technical departments, like paint frame, armory and costumes — are all outside the main theatre building.

On a decorative note, the auditorium ceiling is unusual in comprising separate sections of curved metal — which form the main decorative theme of the room — pierced with small, individual lights. These are embellished with Murano glass from Venice, giving an impression of a starry, asymmetrical sky. The safety curtain, when lowered, continues the metallic theme, as described earlier. The total effect is strong and simple, in this modern, sweeping auditorium, with its clean lines.

The present head of the Grand Théâtre is Monsieur Hughues R. Gall, formerly Rolf Liebermann's assistant in Paris. To judge from his reputation as a pragmatist and innovator of fresh ideas, rather than by his informal manner and strikingly arty office, the opera house is probably on the way to consolidate its place among Western European houses, somewhere between the first and second divisions. Somewhere between a British regional opera house and Covent Garden, say — in fact, not unlike English National Opera, on a smaller scale.