

Golden Glyndebourne

In the fiftieth anniversary year of the Festival Opera House, delightfully if improbably located amidst the Sussex Downs, FRANCIS REID recalls his own Glyndebourne decade which began in the year of their Silver Jubilee.

My first contact with both Glyndebourne and Don Giovanni was from the gods' benches of Edinburgh's King's Theatre during the 1948 Festival. But my actual decision to work at Glyndebourne was not made until 1950. The idea occurred in the queue for gallery early doors – a long wait entertained by the comings and goings through the adjacent stage door, and rewarded with a perch in the very front row watching Beecham rehearse his *Ariadne* orchestra while an impatient house manager fretted to open the house with the (then) traditional blast on his whistle. But the moment of must came during a *Così Fan Tutte*: the Ebert/Rolf Gerard production that was to remain in the repertoire long enough for me to re-light more than a decade later.

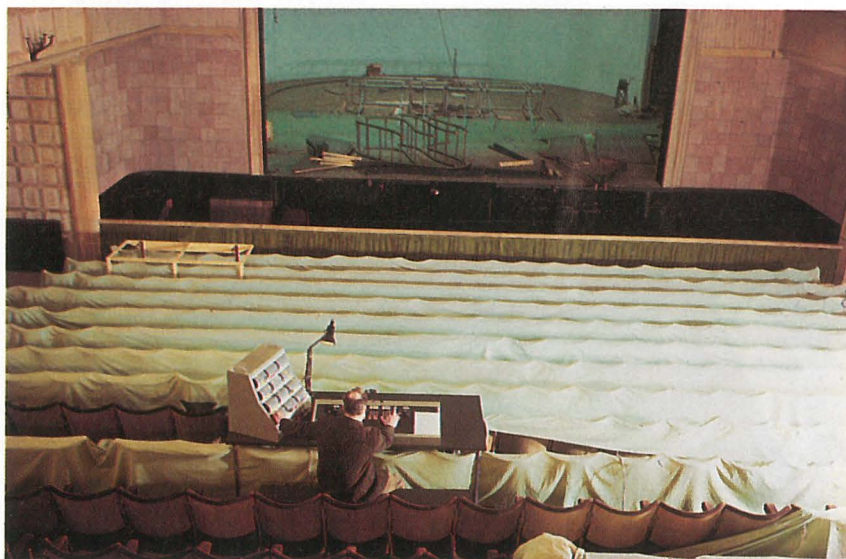
However, before I could even offer my services to Glyndebourne, there were some minor matters to get out of the way. For reasons that I have never quite understood, I was reading pure science at Edinburgh University. On the dubious principle that it would be tidier to graduate, I continued my unmotivated attempts to classify fossils and analyse chemical mixtures. My true education came from such activities as debating, and ultimately rejecting, the behaviourism that was the basis of my university's psychology teaching; from getting lost in the library's humanities stacks (to this day I am reluctant to use library indexes in case I miss the joy of random discovery); and above all, education was attending at least the three concerts or plays per week that were possible on my entertainments budget of five shillings (25p). (And those were the days before student standby reductions!)

After four years reading for a three year degree and having completed but 70% of the journey, the Minister for War (these were the days before political marketing men had re-labelled war as defence) suggested that I might care to assist the Royal Corps of Signals in some minor capacity like seeking out the dry joints in a communications device known as Wireless Set No 19. Fortunately this activity could be carried out at a crossroads leading to several German opera houses, so I was on my way to a closer understanding of music theatre.

On a December Saturday in 1954 I reported for assistant stage manager duty at Tonbridge Playhouse, and on the Sunday I wrote to Glyndebourne to inform them of my need to be allowed to assist them. The letter established contact with Douglas Craig, then Glyndebourne's Stage Director, and lead me to my operatic debut in 1956 with 'Opera for All' as ASM and the organ grinder in *Il Tabarro*. (Caryl Jenner was much displeased that her production manager should move to this Arts Council touring unit at the very time that her own ACGB grant was slashed.) At the end of this six month's tour – learning to light with five spots and two floods, a bigger rig than I had ever had before – I was interviewed for, but not appointed to, a Glyndebourne stage management vacancy. This was fortunate because an opportunity arose to work for two Aldeburgh seasons where the intimate scale of the English Opera Group was a more appropriate place to continue learning my operatic trade by working closely with the likes of Britten, Piper, Cranko and Osbert Lancaster. When the lighting summons came from Glyndebourne, I was stage managing a Stanley Baxter *Mother*

Goose. These were the days when, even in a Freddie Carpenter production for Howard & Wyndham, the stage management had to go on in sundry roles. So survival included learning a lot about timing by feeding the comedians. If they did not get a laugh, it was my fault – just as it was if they did not get a laugh because of the timing of a black-out.

In retrospect it seems ridiculous that I turned down this approach from Glyndebourne. I had no particular wish to specialise in lighting. As a stage manager I had been getting increasingly involved in the lighting process but I did so mainly because I liked going to bed at night and lighting rehearsals seemed to go on for ever. They needed a bit of organisation. Three months later, Easter 1959, Glyndebourne rang again. My planned English Opera Group European grand tour had collapsed. I had a massive dental abscess. I was an overdrawn father at a time when banks were less sympathetic than they are now. The prospect of Carl Ebert's final season as Artistic Director of Glyndebourne (their joint 25th anniversary) suddenly seemed irresistible – even if I would have to turn my hand to



The author at the stalls rehearsal desk of the Strand 120-way (4-preset, 3-group) thyristor control (1964-76)