



Inclusion or be Damned

A lecture by opera director **Graham Vick** for the Royal Philharmonic Society

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As long ago as 1978, as a young staff director at Scottish Opera, I set up a community opera company with funding from what was then called the Manpower Services Commission for a job creation scheme. For a year eleven of us worked in schools, in factory canteens, in prisons and toured to the remotest parts of the Highlands and Islands. We ran workshops, created and commissioned new work, developed new audiences and even made it onto News at Ten. It was the year in which I learnt first-hand that the relationship between performance and audience was the art. That a work of art is meaningless until perceived and responded to and that its quality and value lie only in that response. And then the funding ran out. Scottish Opera chose to let the bulk of this work sink without trace when it could have kept it afloat for less than the cost of one new production's set and costumes. But nothing, of course, must ever touch "the work itself". Disillusioned, I determined that if ever success and influence came my way, I would use it to continue fighting to push the boundaries outwards and to pursue direct and immediate contact with the widest possible public. The temptation to retreat into an ivory tower and draw protective barriers around "the work itself" was not an option.

So, 25 years and 14 countries later, I've had the chance to work in the world's major opera houses with the greatest singers and conductors, not to mention freeze in a disused mill in Yorkshire with 300 unemployed people. I've spent a part of every year continuing and developing, in a variety of ways, the work begun in Glasgow. Far from being some kind of pro bono work this has been at the heart of my artistic journey. What excites me is that in this arena all assumptions, all rules, all knowledge are worthless. Can the work communicate its power directly? The challenge is not only to assist through my understanding of the art itself but through learning to act as a conduit: listening to the inner rhythms of the work, yes - but, equally, listening to the wide range of inner rhythms of the people with whom I'm sharing the experience.

This has had a profound and continuing influence on all of my work. The conviction that this art form can speak immediately to the uninitiated and the initiated alike, and that the responsibility to release its power is shared by both artists and audience, has informed everything I've done - from La Scala to Glyndebourne, from Telford Racquets Court to Keswick Leisure Centre, from the Chuck Works car factory in Birmingham to the Metropolitan Opera, New York. Not always, of course, with the same results.

If opera has a place in the world it must be of the world. Now a world of multi-cultural nations, a world where rapid information technology has brushed aside all assumptions, brought down all absolutes and created a culture of doubt, suspicion and cynicism. Dominated by the philosophy of the marketplace, the high financial rewards of popular culture put a strain on high culture in terms of accountability and justification. However, the moral high ground is no longer available and the retreat into the claims of universal good and ancient snobbery unthinkable. But until now we have continued to perpetuate the civic heritage of the 19th century: a privileged élite opening the doors of its great institutions for the education and enlightenment of the people - education in essentially 19th-century values. Despite the major social and political upheavals of the 20th century this ethos survived and in the 1950s and early 60s it was the foundation for the series of structures and institutions which we now call opera companies. It is not surprising that such values are at best outdated and at worst alienate what is now a broad-based inclusive 21st-century society. The rules of opera-going - the guarded privilege of an ever smaller section of British society - are in growing conflict with the need for openness: open channels of communication and exchange between art and the society which sustains it, and which art, in return, is bound to nourish.

This tension is by and large acknowledged, but the challenge of responding to it has been devolved to outreach departments, education workers, studio theatres and most recently strategic partnerships - anything to keep it away from what is called "the work itself". I do not wish to devalue the very important and often exciting work which has been going on in this field for many years: the sadness is that I have yet to see any real impact on either the audiences or the stages of our major houses.

Indeed, this rather too convenient separation, meant to protect the core work, has only succeeded in isolating it. Though skilful public-relations exercises would have us believe otherwise, frankly most of the theatres I visit are suffering from diminishing audiences. And be in no doubt about this - from New York to Milan to London that is a fact. Statistics may be used to cover this up but it is fundamentally true. Companies lurch from crisis to crisis - sometimes in public... sometimes in private. The future health of opera depends on it embracing the whole of contemporary society and that means being a part of it and being prepared to change as rapidly as society itself. We have to find a way of recovering a fundamental sense of adventure, challenge and interaction: a modern world demands nothing less. However, the desire to keep everybody happy - from paymasters and sponsors to jaded reviewers, from the conservative and wealthy to the fashionably young and wealthy - has created a strange climate of catch-all in which it is sometimes difficult to understand whether what we're being offered is intended as vision, excellence, audience-pleasing or merely a competition to see who can produce the glossiest international brochure.

For our leading subsidised institutions have been encouraged to be too dependent on additional private money. This can only produce a confusion of aims. Inevitably, in a culture of accountability, all those who give money expect something in return - influence. A look at the American model shows us that the Metropolitan Opera receives more money in tax breaks than the Royal Opera receives in public subsidy. This means that all American taxpayers are therefore contributing to the Metropolitan Opera while a relatively small number of wealthy patrons believe it's their domain alone. The law-suit filed by the estate of Sybil Harrington against the Metropolitan Opera for not fulfilling her condition that the work should be staged according to the composer's intentions, is a timely reminder of the dangers of a pact with the devil. As the London Coliseum reopens glossy and glamorous, with enlarged and refurbished corporate entertainment rooms, it's perhaps worth remembering how completely unworkable the stage where the art is made is. With no room to expand in any direction and new restrictions on noise and movement outside the theatre, enormous limitations are now placed on activity. In a nutshell, the scale of spectacle that we witnessed at English National Opera in the 1980s will never again be possible on that stage. When Lilian Baylis founded Sadler's Wells and the Old Vic, her motivation was the need to deal with social deprivation and the acute drinking problem on the streets of London. She knew why she did what she did. Can we say the same? Why do our opera companies exist? Because they're there? Because they have a payroll? Because they receive public subsidy? Or because they are the best possible way of serving the art form - and the taxpayer - given the available money? Because we cannot get away from accountability. Whether we like it or not, those who pay taxes expect, and have a right, to see a return. This is not some Government policy but the culture in which we live. It is after all society which produces government. So it saddens me when those who would resist change or growth, would resist the exciting challenges and possibilities offered by our rapidly changing society, hide behind cheap shots at Blairite policy and political correctness. Equally unworthy is the absurd notion that the choice is between protecting the excellence of art per se and accepting dumbing down as the only alternative. Such crude oversimplification reflects badly on our desire and willingness to learn and grow and on the quality of intellectual debate which surrounds this otherwise vital art form.

It is surely ironic that in such a climate it has taken the much-maligned Raymond Gubbay, with no public subsidy, to finally offer London Mozart in a suitably-sized theatre. Here is a very good example in fact because yes, the titles are commercial, but the venue itself, the Savoy Theatre, represents an artistic advance! So let no-one call that dumbing down. Because it's not only the ethos of 19th-century civic pride that we have inherited but, particularly in relation to London's two opera-houses, we're also locked in a performing time warp. Both too large for classical and pre-classical repertoire, neither possessing the generous forestage appropriate for the 19th-century Italian repertoire. Moreover, both possess an essentially 19th-century symphony orchestra and a chorus with the vocal quality suitable for 19th-century repertoire onwards. In other words time has stood still for too long. The vital continuing change and renewal which marked the art form's first 250 years are straining at the leash. For example, with the current direction of vocal development, we're hearing less and less of the mid 20th-century Italian and German dramatic voices, those big-noise voices developed for those huge American theatres, wherein big is beautiful - it's

true of steaks, it's true of opera singers. But they're not there now. Perhaps we're moving back to the weight of voice which I suspect the 19th century actually heard. It would be timely to examine where singers stand in relation to the proscenium arch, the placing of orchestral players and the style of playing. All of these things interact, interrelate. Recently, the bulk of innovation and serious imaginative development in opera performance has been left largely to the director. Surely there is another enormous and exciting range of possibilities to explore in the physical conditions surrounding the presentation of the repertoire, in the choice of players, singers and chorus and, above all, in the relationship between performer and audience. We make too many assumptions partly because we're afraid to change and partly because we're all, after all, experts. And no-one understands this better than a director!

It's worth remembering that until Wagner, opera was always performed with the house lights on, and indeed in Italy this practice continued throughout the entire 19th century. In other words the performers, thrust onto a forestage in front of the proscenium arch, shared both space and light with their audience. The history of the art form is largely one of lively audience engagement - from the hugely popular 17th-century Venetians to the 18th century's opera buffa and Singspiel, and the hugely populist rough-and-tumble of 19th-century Italian opera. It was only in the hilltop temple of Bayreuth where the audience was plunged into darkness and the orchestra hidden from view rather than being an essential bridge between stage and audience. In creating his sacred festival Wagner unwittingly reduced his audience from celebrants to observers. His performance conditions, which are now how we perform the entire repertoire, have robbed the interaction between audience and stage of an exciting vitality and have produced a culture of comfort, of familiarity and of judgement.

My desire to challenge these assumptions had already led to the founding of City of Birmingham Touring Opera, now Birmingham Opera Company - a highly flexible, lean and agile company. A full-time staff of two and a single office but we had been able to use period-instrument specialists for Rameau's *Les Boréades*, a very distinguished ensemble of Indian classical musicians when Ravi Shankar created *Ghanashyam* for us and we'd mounted productions in a variety of spaces from leisure centres to a burnt-out ballroom above Birmingham's old Bullring shopping centre. However, while the work was adventurous, the audience was not developing - it was growing, but not developing. When we played "The Ring Saga" in Erdington, hard by Spaghetti Junction, it was disappointing to see how many German-manufactured cars filled the leisure-centre playground. The audience inside bore little relation to the people walking the streets of Erdington. We were not reaching the audience I had hoped for. So, three years ago I decided to use the company's grant - by which I mean public subsidy from the City of Birmingham and the Arts Council of England (and, as you may now expect, no sponsorship) - to undertake a major experiment. If this was Birmingham's opera company who should be its audience? It had to be a broad cross-section of all the people and peoples who live and work in the city. How then could we most immediately engage them?

I remember once rehearsing in Pesaro in Italy one very hot August. Desperate for air, I opened the doors onto the street. Within minutes a group of teenage Italian boys had

stopped their football and were watching us, fascinated, as we worked on a Rossini opera seria.

To reach this kind of constituency we decided to recruit members of the community in Birmingham into our work to form a bridge between audience and professional practitioner. People of all ages, races and backgrounds were targeted to ensure a microcosm of the city (it's worth noting that from next year over half of under-16s in Birmingham will be from Black and Asian backgrounds). It was important that anybody who bought a ticket would find themselves represented in the performing company. To achieve this we used expert advice from within the city and in fact we spent 12 months contacting, developing and recruiting. These criteria were also equally rigorously applied to the recruitment of the professionals - soloists, stage managers, assistant directors, everybody. Inclusive role models and the determined promotion of possibility and opportunity are essential if we want not only to broaden the audience but also to enrich the artistic community itself. To further form a bridge between audience and performer we chose a warehouse on the edge of a housing-estate to rehearse and perform in. Here we developed a style of promenade performance in which it became difficult to tell who was a part of the world of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and who wasn't. In truth everybody was. *Wozzeck* - or "Votzek" as it became known in our English-language version - was, of course, a challenging title but nothing reaches out more than the art itself and the greatest art will always speak the most potently. If we were introducing audience and participants to a new art form - and for them a new experience - then let it be the challenging, adult, spiritually powerful form at its most forward-looking. We doubled the number of performances we had ever given in Birmingham and for the first time sold out. Not only that, but the make-up of the audience was an excitingly broad range of ages, colours and creeds including our faithful supporters of many years standing - only one man refused to remove his tie when the bouncer told him it was obligatory - an opera audience unlike any I had ever seen. The most moving result of our experiment was in the final interlude when all the lights went down and only the orchestra was illuminated and the whole audience moved towards the orchestra understanding instinctively that, in opera, music is the action. Experienced hands and newcomers reacted as one.

Year One in Birmingham was the theory - was an idea, was a new vision, and went very, very well - beginner's luck. One particularly interesting thing about the *Votzek* project was that, because the structure of the piece included 12 interludes, I was able to divide these out to various existing groups within the city. My associates and I then visited them on their own turf and developed material based on each group's own response to the themes of the piece. Another group of 100 people rehearsed with me and with the professional soloists to create the world that contained the action. On the final weekend the 12 groups all came together to join the event and contribute their interludes. And they brought with them the same ownership I try to give my collaborators in all of my work. It's all the same thing. The sense of community that we achieved on this first piece - 200 people involved in the project - led to all the separate groups the next year saying, "No! No! We would prefer to be part of the whole from the beginning."

For the second year I chose *Fidelio* - not a bad piece! Indeed one of my two favourite operas and one of the greatest works of art ever created. Once again powerful subject

matter: big mythic themes, the chains of the soul, isolation, the Orphic myth, and more than 100 people wanting to be in the core group - very exciting. A new challenge this time was the choral singing required in *Fidelio*. For this we recruited from various singing groups, choirs, choral societies, gospel groups and glee clubs in Birmingham - and some who'd never sung but wanted to try. These learnt from memory while the experienced sang from scores. Meanwhile the core group contributed the acting. We performed in a Big Top - in a tent next to Aston Villa football ground - and took a step further in the direction of audience involvement and engagement.

And here I want to talk for a moment about the issue of artistic development. Because I'd hate anybody to think I was doing this entirely selflessly. I get something out of this myself in a big way. This was the third *Fidelio* I'd directed, but approaching the piece in collaboration with 200 people from the community of Birmingham - standing on the earth, digging a grave, talking about death, about the chains of the soul, about imprisonment, feeling how people's lives were reflected in the content of the piece (and vice versa), whether those lives were the imprisonment of looking after an ageing relative, of sexuality, or of addiction - was a profoundly moving and instructive experience. So much so that I added in an old tradition - I shouldn't use the word 'tradition' because I despise it!! - let's say an 'old performing practice'. We inserted the overture *Leonore No 3* into the second act of *Fidelio*, inserted it as an exercise in listening and response. Because listening became one of the big themes of the project. The *Leonore No 3* exercise was apparently a very simple one for the actors, yet it turned out to be a long journey - a journey towards listening, and a journey towards the understanding that each person's individual response and way of entering into a work of art is equally important and valid. That took some time to get hold of. They wanted me to teach them what the music was, what it was about and to tell them how they should respond. It took me a long time to get to the point where they understood that what I wanted from them was themselves, that what I wanted was the wealth of their individual responses knitted together. But when they did get it, they got it big time - BIG TIME. Thirteen minutes long, a fantastic, focused concentration as 100 people walked through an enormous tent towards the music; walked right through the middle of the audience as I could walk right through you now, crawling on the floor, laughing with joy some of them, completely unselfconscious, bravely, daringly, going where it would be impossible to get professional performers to go. And that absolute rawness revealed something about the grit in Beethoven's score, because *Fidelio* is about Mrs Florestan. *Fidelio* is about a housewife who discovers she's a heroine. It's not about some heroic soprano, a great dramatic performer, giving a magnificent delivery of a role. It's about a woman you might meet at the launderette in the middle of a crisis, trying to find her husband. That's where the heroism of the piece sits. And that's where I wanted to root it. Then the domesticity of the opening scenes is effortless - completely natural - and the excitement of the journey is that of witnessing the growth of a woman's soul. In this context you can't help wondering about Florestan, who does his duty - and only his duty - and finds himself locked in chains crying in the darkness. What has he achieved, as opposed to his wife? His wife who risks ruining the life of a young girl who falls in love with her because she's disguised as a man, who reaches the point of shooting a man dead and is only saved by divine intervention. She's prepared to kill for her

love and her faith - Florestan is prepared to be silenced for life. You have to ask yourself which of them is worth listening to.

Wanting to plunge the audience into the heart of these issues, the designer Paul Brown and I were particularly challenged by Florestan's imprisonment. At the opening of Act 2, locked away in a dungeon, a starving man sings "God! What darkness here?" Now, there's a lot of nonsense of course spoken about opera. How can a healthy tenor be starving? And so on. Well you know, basically, if he's been in prison and starving and on the verge of death, he can't sing Beethoven. What is important is that cry of darkness. What does it mean and how can we perceive it? Paul and I came up with the idea that not only Florestan but the audience too should be plunged into darkness - darkness and isolation. And this also became an experiment in listening. In the interval, everybody was issued with a bag, a numbered black bag and Rocco, the jailer, came out to the audience to do 'bag drill'. The audience had already been subjected to violence by riot police, had been imprisoned and then released into the light by Beethoven's music - walking under the orchestra and chorus and out into a garden of liberation. They were already part of the performance. But even so, the enthusiasm with which they grabbed the idea of 'bag drill' was extraordinary and took us all by surprise - it was, after all, a high-risk idea. When they returned to the tent, they had to find their numbers and stand on them. This meant that if I stood here, the person next to me is where that music-stand is - or off the edge of the rostrum 6ft away! I could not touch anybody. I was not comfortingly close to other audience members. I was exposed. Obviously, people who were together were given numbers which deliberately split them up. On instruction you placed the black bag over your head. On the first night only one person didn't do it. And that person was....? Well, I can't resist telling you - it was a critic! Nine minutes later they were all still standing, beyond reach, in complete darkness, listening, until the words "Leonore's coming". That was their cue to remove the hoods as Leonore - and Beethoven - brought the light of hope into their darkness. Now this wasn't just some clever, interesting theatrical gag - it was a profoundly important experiment in listening. Because not only do you enter the psychological darkness, but the quality of your hearing and concentration changes within the physical darkness. Not only that, but in the last part of the aria (when Florestan has a vision of his wife Leonore as an angel) having been in the darkness so long, there is a sense of almost hyper-ventilating - you join the visionary moment, just as you joined the desolation. It is almost impossible to explain what I felt as I tried this myself for the first time, as I listened to see if I was going to pursue the idea. Here, within this arena - and this what I really want to underline - I am released to explore the potential of the art form: how we listen to it, how we perceive it, how we can connect to it, how it can be performed. The quartet in the first act of Fidelio is a beautiful, extraordinary, very formal piece of music. So I went into it - because I have assumptions, I have prejudices God knows, loving opera from the age of so high - I went straight into it assuming that, for this quartet, they'd have to stand close together or we wouldn't understand the music. And that's how it remained until five days before the opening. And then I thought, "Well, I've assumed this all along; I haven't even tried anything else." So I split the singers up into the four corners of the wedding-reception tent in which the first scene was happening to see what it sounded like. The experience was revelatory - wherever I went I still heard the quartet, but I heard every strand of it and not just the intertwining. I could choose to tune in and out

where I wanted. I became a part of the quartet and what I heard was my version of it - and only my version of it. This was a very exciting discovery because, what began as a spatial experiment, released to me musical values. What our work is trying to do is not only involve and excite audiences, it's trying to take forward and experiment and push the boundaries of the art form itself – of how else we might perform it, explore it, be excited by it. And to explore the kinds of values which are second nature to a young generation brought up in cyberspace and on interaction and control. Because this is exciting. This is great. There is no reason why we shouldn't enter and embrace a world that can give us so much.

The third year brought new challenges - and problems. We did Bernstein's *Candide* with even greater popular and, indeed, critical success. Three years' critical triumph is not necessarily healthy! In fact it can create an artificial pressure of expectation. You can't have people coming along expecting the next set of rave reviews, asking, "Are we being televised this year?" It's buying in to false values. Not only that, but as people come for the second and third year, they begin to feel an artificial ownership. A divide starts to open up between those who think they know the ropes and those who don't. The choral singers from *Fidelio* who joined us for *Candide* as actors as well were much more assured and had more experience of amateur music-making than the people we recruited from the street. Consequently one person would take up twice as much capacity as someone trying it out for the first time. And in the early days of the third year we started losing people - losing people because they felt out of place. At this point the inclusion became very deliberate on my part. I had to rapidly re-orchestrate and control the group to retain the kind of equilibrium that would welcome, invite and include everybody. So although *Candide* was very exciting - we had our best ever audiences, we did more performances and we sold out - we had to take tickets off sale two weeks before opening. And why? Because the people buying them were ticket-buyers - people who know how to book tickets, know you book in advance, know that this was an exciting thing they'd heard about. Well that was catastrophic! So suddenly we're taking the tickets off sale and thinking, "How can we control who buys tickets?" A shocking thing to say but, frankly, this kind of deliberate engineering is necessary at the moment to take our work forwards. So the final tickets went on sale via the performers only and once again - by the skin of our teeth - we ended up with the exciting mix in the audience we had hoped for.

After our initial three-year experiment, the fourth year is a re-think. The next big production will be in Year 5 as the climax of a two-year experiment - a long-term Monteverdi project (Monteverdi probably, other than Mozart, the greatest genius of all opera composers). Unquestionably we have reached the stage where an opera company is as much to be judged by its performance of *Poppea* as by its performance of *The Ring*! Over these two years we have a new adventure: small pieces - 40, 45 minutes long - done every few months. Each piece will be done three ways with three groups. The first project is *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*. "Mortal Combat" as we're calling it, has three soloists and a small orchestra. It has one production with one group of 20, another production with another group of 20 and another production with a third group of 20. The evening's performance will be of all three productions - one after the other - performed in a department store. The second piece will be *Il Ballo delle Ingrate* - or "Women Beware".

Once again three groups, three different groups, will perform – this time in a bus depot. The third piece - danced to a group of Monteverdi madrigals which I will prepare myself with people who sang in *Candide* - will be danced in the parks of Birmingham under the title "Rites of Spring". Smaller pieces; smaller activity; a shopping centre; a bus depot; the parks; different versions of the same piece; two of the groups made up of people who are now experienced; a new group of over 65s; a group for single parents only, including men, for which we will be running a crèche - and so on. At the end of the second year we will bring together all those who have taken part - 180 - for a production of *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* ("Ulysses Comes Home"), once more returning to the Big Top, and to the earth. If *Fidelio* had big themes, "Ulysses" with its themes of homecoming, of exile, of asylum, has a huge amount to offer to anybody in the community of Birmingham. Nostalgia for a homeland you've never seen... There's much to be examined.

So that's where we go next. We re-examine both aims and method. We already break the mould and try a new timespan. We try continually to learn lessons from where we have been. We're on a steep learning curve. But the aims are long-term - twenty-five years, thirty years ahead. I have come to despise the quick fix of the one-day schools' workshop. I'm sorry, but I've learned to do that because I've done them for years. They're great in themselves, very feel-good and terrific for the statistics. But they have no lasting impact and it's the lasting impact that concerns me. Our aim is to create a relationship between the city and the company, where all in the community - even those who choose not to go - understand the essential value and the possibility of opera. Birmingham Opera Company is my very personal vision and experiment. Obviously I don't see it as the only blueprint for the future. I think it is, however, an example of the scale of radical change that is both possible and necessary, and I would encourage my fellow artists and managers and audience members to find the courage to listen to their inner convictions and pursue them singlemindedly. For all of us the stakes are high, for what is the price of failure? A future of international opera - and second rate-international opera - at its real seat price: for subsidising the wealthy alone cannot continue indefinitely. Or perhaps even more privately-financed country-house opera? Either way, the idea that the future of opera could become solely the plaything of a rich ghetto is profoundly dispiriting. With all the financial and practical pressures around us, let's remember that survival is not enough and keep our eye on the ball.

Graham Vick