

## A CAMBRIDGE OPERA

*Peter Tranchell writes about his opera "The Mayor of Casterbridge," which was performed at the Arts Theatre during the Cambridge Festival*

THE tribulations of a composer getting his first opera performed vary widely. If he is lucky, a manager, a producer, and a conductor take the whole thing out of his hands, and he is allowed to sit in the stalls during rehearsals tearing his hair. I was not lucky; there were no stalls to sit in till the dress-rehearsal, and anyway I was far too busy right to the last moment to have sat anywhere.

All along the line, risks were taken, some by the theatre, some by me. Musically the result has been pronounced a success, in staging not so much, and financially a dismal failure.

The first risk was mine—choosing a Hardy novel. I had been pondering the *Mayor of Casterbridge* for some years, and to show no ill feeling had written a page of overture for Tess of the D'Urbervilles. In 1949 the Arts Council of Great Britain (don't confuse with the Arts Theatre Trust) offered 400 quid each for six operas for the 1951 festival. I told Stephen Joseph, the publisher's son, then up at Jesus, and he exploded with excitement. In three weeks we had produced a synopsis from the novel, and had managed not to sacrifice any important character. That came later.

Meanwhile, Messrs. Curtis Brown Ltd. arranged a contract between me and the representatives of the late Thomas Hardy's estate. They gave me the right to make an opera of the novel in return for 75 per cent. of any monies accruing to me from it. When I complained, the percentage was reduced to 50, and there it stands today. If I had not set my heart on the theme, I should have abandoned it, for I felt cheated; but Curtis Brown's argued (doubtless justifiably) that Hardy was my collaborator if not in person, then extensively in spirit, and I should go halves with the old boy.

The Arts Council rejected the synopsis; and our various occupations separated Stephen and me. For the next eighteen months I was on my own.

Wondering what to do next, I was visited by an ancient clairvoyante, who told me I was an architect called George, and should beware of a blonde in a large government building. However, I was "on the up and up" and I did like a party. This last revelation was so near the truth, I decided to hazard a question.

I asked about the future of an enterprise I was very keen on. After taking a few moments for a telepathic grope in my supraconscious, she announced the enterprise would be a success but not in the way I might have expected. She could see my name in lights, (this never came true)—in, . . . was it the Cambridge Theatre? . . . co-starring with a young man called Ted. "But," she added ruefully, "you must forswear all affairs of love, or it's down, down, down".

I had a preference for up, up, up, so when next occasion offered I came to Cambridge. My rejection by the Arts Council might put paid to the Cambridge Theatre, but the gipsy's warning might equally refer to a theatre in Cambridge. What about the Arts?

Everyone said, what a wonderful plot (little thinking that most of it would have to be sacrificed to the exigencies of operatic convention), and nobody would commit themselves. In fact it was only made clear to me that the opera was to be definitely accepted on 16th November, 1950, some eight or nine months later. This delay had repercussions on me, and caused a deadlock which was responsible for much of the financial difficulty we encountered. The theatre was loth to commission a work not yet written on paper, and meanwhile my innate zest to write music was at a low ebb, sapped by the lack of secure interest all around.

Anyhow, I showed a synopsis to Mr. Rylands and the Professor of Music. Too complex! Professor Hadley and I had a long conference in the cemetery of Little St. Mary's. When we left, Lucetta was dead and buried. With her went all the fornication, crossed-love interest, letters, whispering, moneyborrowing, skimmity ride, pregnancy and miscarriage which alone might have made a trilogy of operas. The skimmity ride was no loss, for I was sure undergraduates prancing about the stage with donkeys and wax images, beating butcher's irons, cleavers and bones, and generally denouncing sexual aberration, could only be comic not horrifying.

With Hardy being such a popular writer, not to say a cult, this first stark abbreviation of the story was another risk, but later Peter Bentley (my producer) and I went further, and perhaps cut things too fine. Maybe we fell between two stools; we cut so much that you had to have read the novel to appreciate what was left. If you had read it, you missed what we had sacrificed.

However in one change I was amply justified. Hardy's Abel Whittle is a snivelling old man whom Henchard (the hero) chases out of bed, fed up at his continual lateness to work. Poor old Whittle has no time to put on his trousers, and all the labourers have a good laugh. Now the Cambridge stage is not the place for an old trouserless man to be chased round and round by a middle-aged baritone, so my Abel Whittle had to be a thirteen-year-old farm-boy. His breechlessness was thus innocuous, and his presence at Henchard's last moments in the final scene was most moving, even if only by virtue of the contrast of a boy's voice with a man's.

But alas, having young boys in a show is itself a hideous risk. "Just William" was not in it. The greenroom suffered a reign of terror whenever the youngsters were offstage, and many the wigs knocked awry, or hats thumped over the crown during the week of Casterbridge.

Well, the next move was to write the libretto, so I started at the end and worked to the beginning—my point of departure being "the will" which Hardy makes Henchard write on his deathbed. My Henchard collapses in his own backgarden and thus only utters the will. This composed itself—on an alternating timpani pedal, of which C was the important note, with the result that much of the opera seemed to be basically in C minor.

At the Professor's request I included the Scotsman's song with its traditional melody. Another risk, for critics were loth to recognise my tunes when they arrived and in spite of the obvious modernity of their melodic structure said they were folk-tunes. All because one tune was a folk-tune. At Mr. Ryland's request I put in the little bit about Mrs. Henchard's death ("and all her silver keys will be took from her"); at Stephen Joseph's request I removed my own lyrics (he said they were noxious) and borrowed some of Hardy's poems; later at Peter Bentley's request I removed these (he thought they were by me, and just as noxious), and put back some of my own lyrics. In July the libretto was ready.

I visited the Professor and played him some sketches. "I can smell music" said he. Dentists are frequently said to tinkle at their nitrous oxide gas, but he was insatiable for sniffing my "Mayor". So on many occasions I repaired to his room, and played through (improvising where no idea had as yet become fixed) singing the whole thing from a libretto at the piano. He sat by with a libretto on his knee, and when duets arrived, he improvised too. We both shouted and caterwauled, and I thumped the keyboard. Complaints poured into the porters' lodge from angry dons all over the college.

The climax came when I did the same act to a room full of Arts Theatre Trustees. A small resonant office, a large grand piano, and a composer whose touch is heavy on the keys and whose voice is harsh to the ears did the trick. The Board was battered into submission, and prepared to change their festival programme to fit the "Mayor" in. And here we ran into further hot water.

The City Authorities had declared they would be too busy and broke over the Royal Show in July to think of anything else, and handed all arrangements over to the Arts Theatre. The obvious thing was to make a plan and invite people to adopt it. But societies that had hitherto made no effort to keep in touch with affairs, nor had volunteered opinions or assistance, immediately took offence. Instead of co-operation or attempt to discuss or alter the plan, those with injured pride begat ventures of their own in peevish rivalry, or held primly aloof.

In this atmosphere of petty bickering it was no surprise that the advent of Casterbridge should have put the cat amongst the chickens. Too much was already on the bill of fare for our amateur musical population to cope with. Something must be sacrificed. The C.U.M.S. committee made a strong bid to quash Casterbridge. After some weeks of move and counter-move, the intrigue resolved itself. Nothing was to be sacrificed, that is, the quality of everything was to be, and this was much worse for me than for anyone else.

As it was, my budget was the slenderest: Negligible scenery (just cut-outs), chorus of 15 (no women), orchestra of 12 (no strings). Only one pro singer. Producer to be found to bear whole burden of organisation, save purse-strings. These were to be held by the Theatre, and a ceiling was imposed on expenditure. Ah yes. That poor ceiling!

But the obstacles ranged against me were thus: My opera was put in the first week of the festival so that there were only three weeks of long-vac term before the first night. *Three weeks!* The Monteverdi Vespers were billed to clash with my dress-rehearsal and the Pageant to clash with my Saturday matinee. I could use no singers or players required for these. The A.D.C. committee decided to act *The Importance of being Earnest*, so we could not rehearse on their stage, and the old Festival Theatre was full of Pye's radio stores, so my poor cast would go on stage for the very first time at the dress-rehearsal and not before. All to be got ready in only three weeks. A new modern opera!

No professional producer would undertake this problem especially when no fee was forthcoming: So the Trustees were very glad when I persuaded Peter Bentley to be the sucker. He was busy with a Nativity Festival in Jesus at the time and so didn't join the fray till Xmas. Then suddenly he did, and so did the spirit of Hardy.

It is incredible to contemplate the risk the Theatre took in acquiescing to our situation. Two young men were to be let loose without any previous experience, with no money to spend, and every disadvantage to put up with. The misplacing of dates sent up our costs by 500 quid alone for orchestra and understudies which had now to be got from outside.

But the biggest risk was this: Having to be my own business manager slowed down my rate of composition enormously, (worry saps the inspiration), and time was wasted on careering about' organising that should have been spent composing. Music must be reproduced for people to learn it. This takes time if amateurs do it, takes money if professionals do it: Time ran out. The orchestral parts cost 125 quid and the vocal score 225 quid. So before we started we were faced with expenditure of 850 quid, a sum already exceeding the "ceiling", without counting costumes, scenery, and overtime for the stage-staff during Sunday rehearsals, etc.

At Christmas I got fed up. Several scenes were ready, but I was dissatisfied with the libretto. I asked Bentley if he had any suggestions. He had. In a month we had completely revised the whole issue and all my music was discarded. In February 1951 I started afresh on something deeper and grander than the previous collection of vignettes. Hardy had taken a hand.

Just then Marie Rambert asked for the score of *Fate's Revenge*, a ballet I'd promised her. So I had to write it there and then. Meanwhile the whole conception of Casterbridge had enlarged; Cast of about 45 and 5 sets of scenery: The part of Henchard a role any operatic singer would ask not to sing more than once a week; (remarkably enough, Robert Rowell sang it just how I wanted it eight times in one week); and an orchestra of 26, including strings, piano, and Hammond organ. The organ was merely to add volume. The Arts Theatre pit is abominable, and seems to cut off extremes of expression leaving a monotonous and ineffective even-ness. The organ was a help, but we still never made enough sheer noise where I wanted it, and our soft notes were never soft enough. The organ cost another 32 quid.

Then the set-designer didn't see eye to eye with Bentley. He resigned and Bentley designed the sets. More worry and delay.

I finished composing in Mayweek, and then started scoring. 3,000 bars to do in a month at most. A crowd of friends came and ruled my barlines in advance, drew the clefs and copied in the vocal parts. Rehearsals began. I was still orchestrating. Luckily more friends got to work training the chorus, so I was not needed.

My most vivid memory is the dress rehearsal rise of the curtain. No-one had seen the production properly till then. My first view was a long line of brightly coloured bottoms. It was one of those milling crowd scenes, but somehow many people seemed to be facing the wrong way. But had it not been for the help of a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, and the very generous sympathy of the Theatre Trustees, we should not have even got that far. One must sometimes be thankful even for bottoms.

In May a curious thing struck me about the music. My principle in composing had been to assess the dramatic peaks and to insert, where the action is simmering in rumination of (or reaction to) a recent development of the plot, a tune. Then I worked back, taking fragments derived from the tune, so that, in the scene leading to the dramatic peak, odd bits would gradually appear to integrate, till—wallop!—the tune is heard complete. But I found this conscious method was being nullified by a subconscious process of the same sort—but apparently haphazard and capricious. All my fragments and all my tunes derived from one tune! And then I saw to my horror, it was somebody else's. But I will go into that next time.

Meanwhile, as I write, it must be confessed that the production of Casterbridge was in fact one big illegality. My contract with Curtis Brown had to be amended to allow for the opera's being performed in Cambridge. That amendment has been pending for 9 months at least, and we still are awaiting the right to stage the opera last July!

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Having had my say about Casterbridge, it is only fair to quote one or two unofficial opinions.

"This 'ere emotional modern stuff is no good for me brine" (elderly citizen of Cambridge).

"Robert Rowell's excellent characterisation in Act II, Scene 1 . . ." (A Cambridge don. This was the night the callboy forgot to warn Robert of Act II, so Robert suddenly heard his music cue while still half-changed, sang his first notes offstage (giving me considerable qualms as to what was wrong) and came on donning his coat just in time; but all his flybuttons were undone and he spent the rest of the scene darting about the stage looking for a dark corner to do himself up. Characterisation!).

A member of the University heard in the street: "I *would* go to Casterbridge, but I can't. You see, I was at school with the composer."

But Ted! Ted never turned up. The gipsy's warning was false, or perhaps it referred to another time. Anyway if anyone called Ted interested in operas, even after reading this tale of woe, let him please get in touch with

PETER TRANCHELL