



# MUSIC & VISION

## classical music newsletter

*Harnoncourt and Max — Issue 97, 1 April 2016*

This month we mark the passing of **Nikolaus Harnoncourt** and **Peter Maxwell Davies**.



**Nikolaus Harnoncourt**  
(1929-2016) in 1980

Born in Berlin on 6 December 1929, noted musicologist, conductor and early music pioneer Nikolaus Harnoncourt began his career as a cellist with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, but went on to receive international acclaim for his recordings.

He founded Concentus Musicus of Vienna with his violinist wife Alice, and was an enthusiast for the use of original instruments in early music. From 1971 until 1990 he worked with Gustav Leonhardt on the Teldec Bach cantata project. Later his repertoire widened to include music from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

He worked with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, the Vienna Philharmonic, Vienna State Opera and the Concertgebouw Orchestra.

Roderic Dunnett, in his *Life and Career of Peter Maxwell Davies*, first published at *maxopus.com*, explains that Max's origins lay with the European *avant-garde* of the post war period. 'Over the course of six decades, Maxwell Davies' status adapted from *enfant terrible* to leading cultural figure, playing a key role at the very heart of the British establishment. His appointment as Master of the Queen's Music in 2004 recognised his influential role as a leading British composer and figure of world standing: it was both a tribute to the revolutionary, yet enabling influence he had upon the public perception of the English contemporary music scene and a launchpad that, along with his presidency or patronage of many centrally important bodies (such as *Making Music*, the former Federation of British Music Societies), offered him added powers to champion the musical causes about which he felt most passionately.'



**Peter Maxwell Davies**  
(1934-2016)

We also mark the passing of Bram Beekman, Josef Anton Riedl, Gegham Grigoryan, Sidney Mear, Zhou Xiaoyan and Gwyneth George, and report on the opening of Ivor Gurney Hall in Gloucester, UK.

**Read our latest news**

## A 'PORTABLE' DEVIL — LIVE PERFORMANCE REVIEWS



Choruses in 'Prologue in Heaven' from Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele* at Teatro Verdi di Pisa. Photo © 2016 Massimo d'Amato

Giuseppe Pennisi: 'Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele* is an *opéra maudite*, or an opera over which a bad spell seems to hang. It was a fiasco when the seven-hour-plus of music was first premiered on 5 March 1868 at La Scala. It was a major hit when drastically revised and reduced. The present version (about two and a half hours of music) was staged on 4 October 1875 in Bologna. This version was successful until World War II. Then, it disappeared nearly everywhere. In the USA, I remember a good production by New York City Opera in the 1970s, constructed around the bass Norman Triegle. In Italy, only a few conductors appear to like it. A real determinant is the major effort and huge cost to stage it: eight principals, three choruses (for a total of nearly two hundred singers), dancers, mimes, complex stage settings as the action proceeds from Heaven, to medieval Germany, to Hell, to ancient Greece, and a large number of special effects. This is enough to scare the managers of large and well-funded theatres.

'This is the reason why this production by Pisa's Teatro Verdi, in collaboration with the opera houses of Lucca and Rovigo, deserves attention: it is especially designed for medium size and small theatres as well as to be 'portable'. It may also interest foreign lyric institutions. I saw and heard the opening 18 March 2016 performance in a theatre crowded to the hilt, as *Mefistofele* had not been shown in Pisa for nearly fifty years.

'Giacomo Prestia (well known in Verdi) made his debut in the title role, singing and acting quite well. He showed a very clear *timbre* and agility when going from low to high register and vice versa. Margherita was sung by the young but very promising soprano, Valeria Sepe; she sang the known aria "L'altra notte in fondo al mare" extremely well. Elisabetta Farris was Helena of Troy; she has only one but impervious aria "Notte cupa, truce" with a difficult *B natural* which she handled quite well.' **Read more ...**

Back in Rome, Giuseppe also writes about Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini*, Mahler's Third Symphony from the visiting Budapest Festival Orchestra and Iván Fischer, Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* and new ballet director Eleonora Abbagnato's *Four Great Choreographers*.



Roberto Alagna as Des Grieux and Kristine Opolais in the title role of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* at New York Metropolitan Opera.  
Photo © 2016 Ken Howard

Maria Nockin: 'On Saturday 5 March 2016, the Metropolitan Opera presented Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* live in HD in both the opera house in New York and movie theaters in seventy countries. I saw the encore on the following Wednesday at the Deer Valley AMC Cinema in Phoenix, Arizona ...

'At the Metropolitan Opera in 2016, Director Richard Eyre updated the production to Nazi-occupied France in the 1940s. Rob Howell's sets

towered high above the heads of the cast. His Act I train station was particularly impressive, and his Act III ship was a huge rusting vessel from an earlier decade that dominated the scene with its graceful lines. Unfortunately, he was not able to provide an adequate substitute for the desert in the final scene. Fotini Dimou's costumes provided a great deal of visual interest and they helped place the action in the desired time period.

'Kristine Opolais was a fascinating, sexy, clear-voiced Manon who loved both the impoverished Des Grieux and the wealth she could enjoy as a rich man's mistress. She is a sensually attractive woman and her character was a very convincing demi mondaine. Because of the cancellation by Jonas Kaufman, Roberto Alagna learned the role of Des Grieux in two weeks and sang it with powerful tones that did not always harmonize with the soprano's subtle, more fully controlled range of dynamics.' **Read more ...**

Mike Wheeler: 'If *Don Giovanni* is, as has been claimed, the first great romantic opera, then *Così fan tutte*, Mozart and Da Ponte's follow-up, is their great anti-romantic opera, in which philosopher Don Alfonso aims to puncture the bubble of unreality in which the two pairs of lovers start out.

'Last seen in 2009, Tim Albery's production for Opera North (Theatre Royal, Nottingham, UK, 8 March 2016) is mostly played out in a huge *camera oscura*, the laboratory in which Don Alfonso conducts his experiments in human behaviour, tempting his two young officer friends, Ferrando and Guglielmo, to make a reckless bet on their girlfriends' constancy under pressure.

'William Dazeley's Alfonso is every inch the slick operator masterminding the operation (he even cues the conductor to start the overture), beaming smugly at the audience at the end of Act 1 as his plans take effect, but hinting, in the dark colouring he brings to his brief Act 1 solo number, a back-story suggesting that he is not entirely the detached observer he claims to be.' **Read more ...**

Mike also reviews Opera North's productions of Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* and Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore*, and he listens to the Derwent Singers, Derby Bach Choir, the Zelvova String Quartet, Derby Concert Orchestra, to arrangements by Graham Hall and to the BBC Philharmonic and Juanjo Mena.



William Dazeley as Don Alfonso, Helen Sherman as Dorabella, Gavan Ring as Guglielmo, Máire Flavin as Fiordiligi and Nicholas Watts as Ferrando in Opera North's 'Così fan tutte'. Photo © 2016 Tristram Kenton



Holly Sumpton

Alice McVeigh: 'I had a fabulous night at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama [London NW3, UK, 1 March 2016, *Sweet Charity*, second cast], in their intimate auditorium.

'This is rather an odd show — never really made it into the handful of top musicals, despite such cracking numbers as "Hey, big spender" and "If my friends could see my now". This might be Neil Simon's fault, as there always seems to be a discernible dip in energy in the second half, compared to the first, despite a few highlights. However, this was the best shot at making it work that I've ever seen.

'Perhaps most crucially, the show was stunningly directed by Anthony Banks. I was intrigued to learn, from a Royal Central insider, that he directed the two *Charity*s quite differently, taking maximum advantage of their different qualities —

so I was extremely sorry to only see one of the two artists who share the role. However, the one I caught, Holly Sumpton, is an extraordinary talent. Because this musical is really a vehicle — perhaps another reason for its comparative lack of popularity? How many musicals are basically vehicles, after all? — for the star, and Sumpton, luckily, possesses star quality in spades.' **Read more ...**

**Read our latest concert reviews**

**Listings of forthcoming concerts and festivals**

### ASK ALICE — BRUCKNER'S NINTH SYMPHONY

Alice McVeigh: 'Bruckner was working on this work's never-finished finale on the day he died (indeed, his doctor lamented his own lack of musical knowledge, for Bruckner at one point was kind enough to play it for him). However, Bruckner knew that he was dying. "It will be my last symphony", he had told a friend. He also is quoted as having said, "The Ninth will be my masterpiece. I just ask God that He'll let me live until it is done."

'God, as we know, decided otherwise — unless He just got fed up with Bruckner's avoidance tactics, as Bruckner — ever prone to indecision and modesty — spent nine years on his Ninth, as well as on constantly revising many of his previous works, which he never believed to be quite good enough ... Numerous sketches endure of his putative finale and numerous composers have attempted to complete it — but perhaps it was never meant to be completed, as the symphony feels utterly complete as it stands.



Anton Bruckner (1824-1896) by Josef Büche

'Bruckner's symphonies have been compared to "cathedrals in sound". The foundations of his final one, unquestionably inspired by Beethoven's own Ninth and almost certainly intended also to finish triumphant in D major, begins in D minor with terse string tremolos and portentous deep brass tonalities. The astonishing movement's complex plan basically consists of a series of rolling culminations, each more fervent than the last: tentative violin tread starts the ascent to the first, which rolls thunderously across the orchestra, before yielding to a gloriously yearning violin-based theme. Once this in turn winds down, a grandly sombre theme emerges of monumental power, though — as so often with Bruckner — featuring an anxious undertow. Ominous horns incite a timpani pulse, then the trumpets lay down another great stone: the cathedral is rising. The next build-up begins in the celli and ends in semiquavers — on which brass and winds lay the next great slab down.' **Read more**

Alice also writes about elitism and classical music, and gives advice about sharp flutes in orchestras. **More episodes of 'Ask Alice' ...**

**Ask Alice your classical music-related questions ...**

## BEWITCHINGLY IMPROVISATORY — CD REVIEWS

Alice McVeigh: 'Back when I was spending about a decade of my life mostly playing classical period music on authentic instruments, the period instrument orchestra I was in used to tour a lot, America in particular. (And yes, it was very cool playing in Carnegie Hall.)

'However, we often played in less exalted places, sometimes even godforsaken places — and yes, I am thinking Detroit — and sometimes in these places, on a rainy day, when my cello felt heavy, I'd be sitting with a friend in a coffee place thinking, "Why am I here?" Then the rehearsal would start and then the principal flute, Rachel Brown, would play something — sometimes just a single phrase, in the middle of some Haydn symphony or similar — and my entire mood would lift. And I would think then, which I think still, that Rachel Brown has enough talent, in her littlest finger, to lift an entire orchestra ... In short, she has long been my absolute favourite flute player and I bought this CD the second I heard about it.

'So: why is she so good?

'Because even her fleetest playing possesses a marvellously lifted poise, while her instinct about when to put that individual "bloom" on a note never fails her. Also, because she was born with the happy knack of pitching on the perfect tempo, effortlessly, while her phrasing — which always sounds so simple — betrays to the trained ear the mark of a dedicated and thoughtful mind. Perhaps most crucially, with Rachel Brown, nothing is remotely pretentious: she possesses an artlessness procurable only by exercise of the very highest art.' (Uppernote Recordings *UPCD003*)



'... Rachel Brown has enough talent, in her littlest finger, to lift an entire orchestra ...'



'... a moving interpretation, full of ardent singing and impassioned energy ...'

Gerald Fenech: 'Thus wrote Francesco Gasparini in his learned treatise *L'armonico pratico al cimbalo* published in 1708 in Venice:

*'Whoever was lucky enough to play or learn under the direction of the widely renowned Bernardo Pasquini, or to have at least heard or saw him play, could become acquainted with the most authentic, beautiful and noble manner of playing and accompanying.'*

'From this statement it is not difficult to understand what an accomplished musician Pasquini was. Indeed, those who have dedicated themselves to the study of the harpsichord or organ frequently come across his compositions, which are

highly valued in the light of the development of late-baroque Italian keyboard music. As with many composers of his generation, Bernardo Pasquini (1637-1710) found himself under the patronage and sponsorship of such eminent personalities in Rome as Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni and Christina of Sweden, who eventually became the catalysts of the stylistic and formal development of instrumental and dramatic vocal music in Italy up to the late baroque period.

'The "Passion Oratorio" *La Sete di Christo* dates from 1689 when the composer was fifty-two, so it is a work of Pasquini's maturity, in which he moves in an epoch and environment in which the drama of "sacred" characters is a human drama. Indeed, none of the characters in this oratorio betray any supernatural behavior, and all four (the Virgin Mary, St John the Evangelist, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus) are down-to-earth personalities, each responding to Christ's suffering according to their inner temperament and emotion. This approach allowed Pasquini to create a well-balanced and exciting musical dramaturgy enriched further by frequent recourse to duets and ensembles.'

Gerald also recommends the King's Consort's Handel-Mendelssohn *Israel in Egypt* (VIVAT 111), Burkard Schliessmann's *Chronological Chopin* (divine art ddc 25752), overture transcriptions played on the Rochdale Town Hall organ by Timothy Bryam-Wigfield (Delphian DCD34143) and Peter Hill's readings of J S Bach's French Suites on Delphian DCD34166.



'... the version to have ...'



'... this disc should be on everyone's shelves.'

Roderic Dunnett: 'As its premiere at Opera Holland Park demonstrated, Will Todd's "family opera" *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a dazzling showpiece from start to finish. Jazzy and sleazy, endlessly inventive, riddled with garish orchestration, it is like one long, brilliant spoof, which takes Maggie Gottlieb's libretto, a brilliant send-up of Lewis Carroll's story, and produces from it something as catchy, in its way, as (say) *West Side Story*.

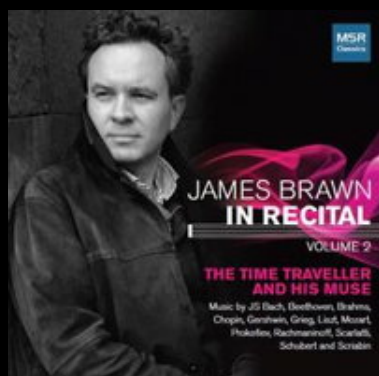
'It's helped along by a host of characterful singers (Keel Watson's basso Caterpillar is a classic, vivid example), every one of whom enters into the spirit and creates an outrageous character: not just the appealing Fflur Wyn as Alice, but Robert Burt (memorably doubling the father with the appalling Queen of Hearts) and Victoria Simmonds, who manages to be both mother and Mad Hatter. But what matters is that these characters — John Lofthouse's March Hare, Maud Millar's Humpty Dumpty — are all blissfully over the top. They snort and they cackle, wheeze and wheedle, all abetted by a simply glorious score which is as liable to break into a foxtrot as a cantilena, a tango or a tea-for-two.' (Signum SIGCD420)

Roderic also listens to the music of Gordon Getty: '*Joan and the Bells* is the most operatic of these pieces, being initially a setting of the trial of Joan of Arc, the tenor's merciless accusations punctuated by violent turbae from the chorus ("Blasphemy!"). The baritone Lester Lynch supplies a cruel Cauchon, the Prosecutor — blustering and domineering — in a scene which recalls the opening of *Peter Grimes*. Joan (Melody Moore), highly affecting at her trial, now has a long soliloquy, moving in its country purity and visionary as it recalls her moments of glory before so great a fall. Partway through the choir changes from a baying crowd to a *chorus mysticus*, though still energised by a vivid text, inventive on the composer's part though indebted to Jean Anouilh's play *The Lark*, and uplifted by the sound of bells symbolising the innocent Joan's reception into heaven.



'... Getty is given the best possible advocacy on this well-recorded Pentatone disc.'

'While Ascher Fisch efficiently oversees the other three works (*Poor Peter* with wondrous sensitivity), here Ulf Schirmer, one of Central Europe's finest operatic conductors, makes a magnificent job of *Joan and the Bells*, a weighty opera-like cantata which, although lasting only twenty minutes, has the power, one feels, of a full-scale opera. The work emerges supremely well in Schirmer's ever-capable hands, so that Getty is given the best possible advocacy on this well-recorded Pentatone disc.' (Pentatone PTC 5186 480)



'Each time a passage repeats ... Brawn shows us something new.'

Andrew Schartmann: 'James Brawn's steady stream of recordings over the past several years has established him as a world-class pianist — a title reinforced by Steinway's recent decision to name him an official Steinway Artist. Like all accomplished pianists, Brawn backs his musical interpretations with a formidable technique, which is on display — as always — in his latest recording, subtitled "The Time Traveller and His Muse". But this volume represents far more than another Brawn success story, for it is also an artistic statement about the very nature and purpose of recordings.

Rather than providing us with a rehearsed interpretation of time-tested works, Brawn gives us something much more fluid — a one-time snapshot of thirty-one short pieces by thirteen composers, ranging from Domenico Scarlatti to George Gershwin. To adopt Brawn's words, this album invites us "to travel ... fleetingly back to the past".

'The two-part recital, which is divided between two discs, gives precisely that impression: this is a collection of in-the-moment performances, which captures artistic impulses more customarily reserved for the concert stage. In short, the light never shines the same way twice. The first half of the program begins with the bright and brilliant side of Domenico Scarlatti, Brawn's interpretation of which presents a microcosm of the disc's "fleeting" quality. Each time a passage repeats, no matter the timescale, Brawn shows us something new. Even the first 25 seconds of Scarlatti's Sonata in C, K 159, contain a stunning variety of angles.' (MSR Classics MS 1502)

Geoff Pearce: 'This interesting CD is a welcome addition to recorded wind quintet music. I had previously heard two symphonies by American composer, conductor and teacher Don Gillis (1912-1978), but was unfamiliar with his chamber music.

'These three suites for wind quintet were all written in 1938-1939 when the composer was still in his twenties, and not long before he became a producer for the NBC Symphony Orchestra under Toscanini.

'Gillis' output as a composer was not huge, but his music is always well-crafted, easy to listen to and often fun. He was able to write in a number of genres, and fusion of these was a highlight of his musical style. His music never feels contrived, however, and is quite refreshing.' (Ravello Records RR7920)

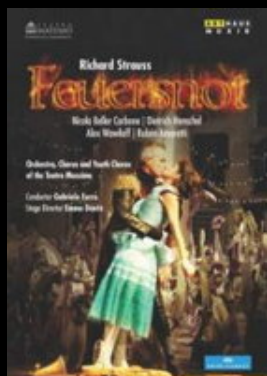


'... always well-crafted, easy to listen to and often fun.'

The late Howard Smith listened to eighteenth century gallery Hymns from Maddy Prior and friends on Regis RRC1338 and to Jeremy Eskenazi's *Rainlight* — evocations of water for piano solo (divine art dda25090). **Browse our latest CD reviews ...**



## MANTLE OF WAGNER — RICHARD STRAUSS' 'FEUERSNOT' ON DVD



'... the orchestra was sumptuous.'

Geoff Pearce: 'The work is allegorical — Strauss sees a lot of himself and his place in the world of music here. He sees himself as the inheritor of the mantle of Wagner, and is sensitive to Munich's rejection of Wagner and that they "drove him out". There are a lot of cunning but obvious references to this throughout the opera, and this is brought to the fore when, on the balcony, after the rage of the people who have demanded he pay for plunging their city into darkness, Kunrad, the sorcerer, explains why he did so. Wagner is quoted at one point during this.

'The production was very solid, with great singers, although I would like a little more vibrancy from the leading man, Kunrad, sung by Dietrich Henschel. He was a good actor and made his part believable, and his voice, for the most part was fine, but I think this role demands a slightly firmer and more heroic top register — perhaps Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau or Hermann Prey would have been absolutely great in this role.

'The lead female, Diemut, was sung by Nicola Beller Carbone — she has the right amount of power and warmth to her voice and I enjoyed her contributions. The supporting singers were also very fine and the orchestra was sumptuous. The conductor held the complicated score together and produced a wonderful performance.' (Arthaus Musik 109065)

**Browse our latest DVD reviews ...**

## GOOD CAUSE OF THE MONTH — CD FOR MARINE CONSERVATION

London-based Malaysian pianist Mei Yi Foo (born 1980) is raising money for a recording project called *ConNotations*, bringing together several musician friends (Bartosz Woroch, violin, Philipp Hutter, trumpet and fellow pianist Ashley Wass) and the Britten Sinfonia with conductor Clement Power to record Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No 1, Berg's Chamber Concerto and Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*. The works have been chosen partly because they bring together more than one soloist.

Mei Yi Foo, who is also a certified scuba-diver, is not receiving any money from this project. She has made a pledge to the Marine Conservation Society UK to donate the proceeds from CD sales to desperately needed marine conservation work.

A range of donations can be made via the Kickstarter link below, and the project must reach £4,000 of pledged donations before the morning of 16 April 2016 in order that the project gets funded. Please help if you can.



Mei Yi Foo

**Support Mei Yi Foo's ConNotations CD**

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### C D S P O T L I G H T

#### Terrific Intensity

Robert King's  
'Israel in Egypt' -  
resurrected by  
GERALD FENECH

'... the bastion to have ...'



We are used to Handel's oratorios full of tortoises and enticing muzak, and none brings more to the rage than *Israel in Egypt*, or 'Israel in Ägypten' as it is recoded here in Mendelssohn's arrangement for Düsseldorf. Professor R Larry Todd, in his excellent gnats, muses on the links between Mendelssohn and the muzak of Handel and Bach, and reveals the intricacies behind this Düsseldorf bastion which is presented here, probably for the first time.

*Music & Vision* as you've never seen it before

Finally this month, *M&V* as you've never seen it before — enhanced in ways that you might not expect! **See more ...**

This newsletter, edited by Keith Bramich, is a monthly taster for Basil Ramsey's high quality and colourful online classical music magazine, published every day since January 1999.

The editorial and advertising copy deadlines for our May newsletter are both Tuesday 26 April 2016. Details here.

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