

English Group Journey: Summer Opera Companies and Aldeburgh Festival 5-16 June 2024

BLOG

We have been impressed with British trains, comfortable, on time and with helpful staff. In two hours we disembarked the train at Frimley to meet our little group of friends, ready for a fortnight of musical delights at the Lakeside International Hotel, a strange place indeed. Part of a large complex on the edge of the town of Frimley beside a rather dreary lake bordered by mostly commercial buildings, the hotel was large and almost completely empty, with one person at reception. Breakfasts were almost inedible and other food virtually non-existent. We later discovered the hotel is used mostly for large sporting or low level corporate events. At least it was clean, quiet and the beds comfortable, and our schedule for the week at the Lakeside could not have been more contrasted in terms of quality and excitement.

Our group was much smaller than our journey in Vienna and Berlin, originally nine of us reduced to seven with the late withdrawal of one couple due to a diagnosis of a serious illness. Survivors for our English journey of musical delights, beside Sally and me were all of friends Virginia Braden, Doug Tribe, Robin White, Andrew and Vickie Neill and for some of the time our dear friend Susie Beaumont. We also had the challenge of running it ourselves as Claudia does not operate in the UK. We hired a nine seater Renault people mover and Andrew Neill agreed to drive us everywhere in it except for two very long driving days where we hired a young professional driver called Tudor. Andrew, in his seventies, was phenomenal with his skill, patience, stories,

knowledge and stamina. Some days we added friends to join us. The conversation, scenery and always interesting way stops made our daily journeys a constant delight.

Our week at the Lakeside included performances of operas in three of England's famed private opera companies situated on beautiful country Estates that operate for three or four months in the



Andrew, AJ, Doug, Virginia, Sally and Robin

summer, all in a similar manner where patrons are asked to arrive early in the afternoon to enjoy drinks in the gardens in the afternoon leading to a performance starting c. 5 pm with a long interval of one or two hours, enjoyed as picnics in the gardens or in their private restaurants. Formal dress is preferred, and elegance and charm of manner mandatory!

Nevertheless, If the production is boring or offensive, and the singers inadequate, no amount of elegance and good manners will save the day. Luckily that didn't happen to us.

Grange Park was the first of our smart private opera companies, perhaps not quite as up to the mark as the others. We had two one act operas. *Aleko*, an early opera by Rachmaninoff, not especially noted as an opera composer, starred the great baritone Bryn Terfel as Aleko - an alienated outsider, who joins a band of gypsies out of an ideal of personal

freedom, only to be psychologically destroyed by the ingrained moral conventions he has ironically sought to escape. He is a man with a turbulent past and a deeply ingrained sense of honour. I found the piece rather confusing despite good performances by the singers.

The interval was more enjoyable. Vickie Neill had booked a large open sided tent for our up-market picnic that she had prepared, cooked, brought wine and turned into a feast. It was part of an informal garden with only a few around us as most guests were scattered in different gardens over the large estate. After the interval, we had Puccini's comic end-piece *Gianni Schicchi* of his triple bill *Il Trittico*. Again Bryn Terfel was the lead as the eponymous hero. The performance was spot on, funny and entertaining as the bevy of related characters tried to outwit the church from its inheritance of the grandfathers's fortune.

Glyndebourne - forever.

The very next day we were off to see Bizet's ever popular *Carmen* at Glyndebourne, probably the most treasured and oldest extant private opera company in the world. Andrew, with his superior knowledge /taste(?) in these matters, decided he and Vickie would not join us for the performance, as there was one with a better singer as Carmen later in the season and he had the advantage of living in England. So Tudor drove the rest of us and we had invited our dear friend Susie Beaumont to join us. When we arrived it was a perfect afternoon. The gorgeous grounds and pristine green lawns bounded by a pretty stream with hills and farm buildings in the middle distance, were full of well-dressed people strolling, sitting at little garden tables or stretched out on the lawns, all with drinks close at hand. We bought drinks, strolled, chatted in delight at the ambience, unexpectedly met others we knew until gentle bells drew us into the theatre. In contrast to the English pastoral perfection outside, the production of *Carmen* was up-dated to a scarcely definable military setting with drab, even ugly costuming, especially Carmen though she sang well. Musically it was at a high standard and *Carmen* never fails to thrill and entertain its audience.

For the long interval, we had booked the Mildmay restaurant with its excellent menu, open to the evening light and with tables full of happy people. The culmination of the opera with Don Jose killing Carmen lacked the usual shock and horror. When the audience departed as the sun set, I had the impression that everyone had enjoyed the Glyndebourne experience, but perhaps more for the setting than the opera.

The Three Gs

Despite arriving back at Lakeside Hotel well after midnight from Glyndebourne, there was no well deserved sleep-in for Saturday 8th June. Looking back weeks later, it seems incredible we had three all-day opera events on successive days: the three Gs: Grange Park, Glyndebourne and Garsington. Actually all day opera events and more. On Saturday morning, our back up driver Tudor, collected us from Lakeside and drove us in the opposite direction to Susie Beaumont's lovely home at West Green (which sports yet another private opera company, though not as grand as the 3G's). Susie had invited us all for lunch that we ate at at a big table in front of her house in the gentle sun overlooking spreading lawns and fields, not unlike Glyndebourne itself. It was hard to tear ourselves away from her table in the afternoon, but we had a long drive to get to Garsington - what a bother!

The gardens and surrounds at Garsington, a large and picturesque estate owned by the Getty family in Buckinghamshire are perhaps the most beautiful of the three G companies. As at Grange Park, Vickie and Andrew had brought a tent and another wonderful picnic for the long interval in the park-like grounds. An hour or so before the performance, three young singers from the company gave short song recitals in a small grotto in the park that I thought an ideal intro to the opera. The theatre is a simple but spacious metallic structure with some visibility through the walls. The opera for the night was Rameau's *Platée*, an absurd baroque comedy of the early 18th century. *Platée* is a

naive character involved in a heartless plot, devised by the gods to cure Juno of her jealousy over Jupiter and his romantic attachments. In this hilarious and ingenious production, it is set as a spoof of the indulgent goings on in a modern TV studio. It was funny and demanded virtuoso stage action from all characters, but it had little likeness to the original opera.

In our planning of this musical tour, I said to Andrew, we have nothing scheduled on Sunday 9th. Metaphorically he groaned that after such a big week, Sunday is a day of rest. A few weeks later he emailed me to suggest we might try to inveigle ourselves to visit the Cobbe Collection, reputedly the finest collection of keyboard instruments in the country. I remember thinking driving a long way for the academic pleasure of a lot of old instruments might be a bit so-so. How wrong (ignorant) can you be! The collection is at Hatchlands Park, a National Trust mansion in extensive park-like grounds, a grand cream stone house that is awe-inspiring on entry. Alec Cobbe, curator and owner of the instruments, as far as I understand, has grace and favour residency for his family and his collection in the building. The public has access to the collection, and in this case, Andrew had arranged the unusual privilege of having Alec accompany us and personally show us the entire collection in return for £50 donations from each of us. We toured perhaps 10-12 large rooms, each crammed with keyboard instruments, from hundreds of years old to 20th century examples such as early Steinways.

Apart from the huge and magnificent collection, the interior of each room was full of great paintings dating back hundreds of years, frescoes and an astonishing range of objets d'art. But the ultimate privilege was that Alec opened, explained the provenance, the type of sound of each and played a piece on almost every instrument. Savouring the sound and tone of each instrument and having Alec play and explain the kind of music it was meant for was a truly memorable experience.

Aldeburgh Festival, Suffolk

Monday 10th heralded a total change to our journey, different in almost every imaginable way. First we were leaving the Lakeside (no regrets from any of us) to travel half way across England at its widest point. The opulence of the 3 Gs and their social settings was left far behind. Andrew drove for half the day across the north of London, and north-east to the mostly flat east coast of Suffolk to Aldeburgh, venue for the Aldeburgh Festival in June every year that Benjamin Britten and his companion, tenor Peter Pears founded in 1948, and which has grown to be arguably the finest music festival in Britain. Aldeburgh is a modest beach side town facing the North Sea, architecturally and socially unpretentious, but during the Festival, music lovers flock to the always fascinating range of concerts and musical events.

We had months earlier booked a large three storey holiday house in nearby Thorpeness called The Tower. On arrival we found it spacious and comfortable with expansive views of the sea, but were a bit disconcerted by the narrow bottom to top spiral staircase. Being thoughtful people - ha ha - Sally and I allocated the ground floor bedrooms with ensuite's to Robin and Virginia so that Doug, (being a man) and Sally and I had to negotiate the vagaries of the stairs at night, while Andrew and Vickie stayed at their own holiday house in Aldeburgh itself.

Isn't it strange how often things work out in the most unexpected ways. After the long drive to Aldeburgh and the rather awkward settling into the odd 3 story house The Tower and its inconvenient - even dangerous spiral staircase, all we wanted to do was work out the kitchen facilities, have a bite to eat and have an early night. At least, I am sure most of our little group thought that way, but no, our first concert at the Festival loomed. And it wasn't even at Aldeburgh, but another half hour's drive away in a village called Blythburgh. I dared not admit to anyone, not yet, that I had cooked it up months earlier after looking at the Festival program. The Blytheburgh church had been the venue for

my first concert at the Aldeburgh Festival - in 1964. I had driven from London, in great excitement, in an old 10th hand Thames minivan to attend a concert by all time greats Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Benjamin Britten at Blythburgh Church. Except, except ... I took a wrong turning half way there and found myself approaching Clacton on Sea, the dreaded seaside resort of the great unwashed (or so I was told). To the present day, I have never been so furious and unhinged, swearing at the open air, kicking the van, screaming with rage. I turned around and drove like a demon another 90 minutes to Blythburgh, arriving just in time for the 2nd half of the concert. What I heard was wonderful of course, and never to be forgotten.



Blythburgh Church

So there was history in my choice for our first concert of this visit to Aldeburgh. And this time we had the indefatigable Andrew in the driver's seat so we arrived safely in time. The ancient stone church with its clear glass windows sits on a rise overlooking a beautiful undulating landscape.

Inside it is serene and light-

filled. The program called *Mystic Ritual* was given by the 8 voice Marian Consort with violinist Daniel Pioro in an exquisite program based on the music of composers like Pärt, Tavener, and mediaeval composers like the abbess Hildegard of Bingen and the Byzantine mystic, Kassia, to an extent re-arranged by contemporary composer Tom Coult for the purpose of this concert at Blythburgh. in Daniel Pioro's words, this event will create "one of those rare moments where the often-made connection between music and the Divine is totally

appropriate”. Like all Aldeburgh events the church was full and the musical experience was magical.

Our busy tour at the Festival came into top gear the next day with three events at Snape Maltings, a converted maltings factory with other public musical and hospitality facilities at the village of Snape, twenty minutes drive from Aldeburgh that has become the superb main centre of the Aldeburgh Festival. We heard Judith Weir, the Master of the King’s Music, and resident composer for this year’s festival, give a fascinating talk on her work, together with two excellent concerts, especially the evening concert in the large Snape concert hall with the Knussen Chamber Orchestra full of young musicians playing for their lives in great performances of Mozart’s piano concerto in c minor K491, the Jupiter symphony No 41, his last and greatest symphony, and a new work by Judith Weir.

]The next day our travels continued - no rest for Andrew: nearly 200 kilometres to Cambridge and Kings College. But it was his idea and what an idea it was! He is a good friend of Richard Lea, an alumnus of Kings College and of its famous choir, a fine professional singer and soaked in Kings College Chapel culture. We arrived late morning and wandered along “the backs”, the mostly wooded edge of the lawns at the back of the colleges that border the Cam river where we watched groups punting. Kings Chapel was very imposing and we felt honoured to meet Richard who took us to lunch in “hall”. After lunch he took us into the chapel and for the next two hours showed us everything special about the building, in particular the extraordinary windows, of which there are 12 massive windows on either side of the chapel each with dozens of separate panes in five vertical rows, telling Christian stories. In addition there are overwhelmingly brilliant windows in the

east and west ends. If you don't know Kings' Chapel, it is a very long building and one of the great marvels of English Gothic and Perpendicular architecture. It was built over many years during the Wars of the Roses in the 15th and 16th centuries.



< West windows at Kings' Chapel Kings



College ChapelChapel >

I have visited Kings' Chapel many times over many years, but like me, if you marvelled vaguely at the colour and scale of the windows, the experience Richard Lea gave us dwarfed any previous visit. He knew all the windows intimately, the stories each told, the technical aspects of their design and construction and the history of the building of the chapel. It was overwhelming experience both aesthetically and spiritually.

And this was just the first half of our tremendous day! We farewelled Cambridge and Andrew drove us to Ely, another half hour's drive away and home of one of England's greatest and largest cathedrals, and on this evening the venue for yet another 'Aldeburgh Festival' concert. As soon as we arrived we made a beeline for seats as close as possible to the vast dome, not unlike in size and design (and resonant acoustic) to St Paul's cathedral in London. The program was given by a 40 voice choir called *Tenebrae*, and was inspired by the famous Motet by Tallis called

‘Spem in Alium’ that requires 8 choirs of 5 voices. The concert featured choral pieces by leading modern composers like Tavener, MacMillan, Unsuk Chin whose work derives so much from ancient composers like Tallis. The atmosphere and sonority in the great space was deeply moving, and continued the exceptional musical treasures of this remarkable Festival.



The shell on Aldeburgh beach

In this blog, I have said little about Aldeburgh itself as most of our great musical experiences have occurred in Festival venues a little or a long way from the town. Nevertheless the town itself is charming and very interesting. On the Friday 14th, we gathered at the southern end of the town on the walkway above the beach and met Alison Andrews [surname correct?] a long time resident and leading activist in working for and maintaining the physical welfare of Aldeburgh. Like much of the east coast of England, it is exposed to the vagaries of the North Sea and the terrible winds from the sea and ultimately from the steppes of Russia. Low sea walls front the town and extend south along the coast and around the river Alde that empties into the sea about a kilometre south. It was a chilly day threatening rain, but Alison took us on a long walk around the walls and along the river explaining how vital strengthening of the walls was for the safety of the town and the flat agricultural lands around it to the south. She explained that twice in the 20th century, the town and surrounds had been flooded and almost destroyed by gales from the sea, and that she worked with other nearby

municipalities to impress on government how vulnerable they were and constantly sought funding to maintain and strengthen sea defences.

I'm sure you'll agree this blog is too long but I don't apologise because we were incredibly lucky to have had such exceptional musical and many other memorable experiences over the previous six weeks in Europe and England. I'll finish off with references to our two concerts on Saturday 15th, each of which have old historic connections.

In the morning Andrew drove us to Orford, a pretty town about 20 ks away whose church is yet another regular venue for the Aldeburgh festival that's not in Aldeburgh. This time it was a solo cello recital by German cellist Alban Gerhardt of JS Bach's 6th Solo Cello Suite followed by the First solo cello suite by Benjamin Britten. Both are wonderful works but there was a special reason for me to include this recital in our Aldeburgh program. A few days earlier some of us had visited the parish church in Aldeburgh, a large and elegant church that was the principal venue for the Festival before the Festival complex was built at the Snape Maltings. Now it has largely retreated to its traditional role as parish church except for two important exceptions. Two very plain black stone gravestones standing next to each other in its graveyard are the last resting places of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears. Inside the church on one side wall are three magnificent paintings by the great British artist John Piper, best known for his paintings in Coventry Cathedral when it was rebuilt after its destruction in WW2. For me, these features were reminders of my first visit to the church in 1965 at a Festival concert. I sat in a seat next to the opposite wall where the Piper paintings hang. The great Russian cellist Rostropovich played the premiere performance of Britten's First cello suite. The church was packed and cheered the great cellist to the echo when he finished the performance. He then stood up, took a little piece of paper from his jacket pocket, and in halting English thanked his dear friend Benjamin Britten (standing beside him) for dedicating the great work to him. In a way, I was sad the performance by Gerhardt

was not in the parish church where I heard the premiere all those years ago.

On our Saturday night the Festival presented a replica of its very first concert that took place on 5 June 1948. Purcell's Chacony, Handel's Organ concerto in d minor, Britten's St Nicolas and in June 2024, on the Festival's 75th birthday, they added a new commission - the first performance of Robin Haigh's *LUCK*, a trumpet concerto for Matilda Lloyd. Now established internationally, both Haigh and Lloyd are former Britten Pears Young Artists. Her performance of *LUCK* was nothing short of sensational.

After our last concert on Sunday morning Andrew drove us all back to London, leaving as all, I hope, with great memories of Aldeburgh. We dispersed to our various destinations, Sally and I to Gatwick airport the next morning to hire a car to meet Adam and Trudy and drive to Petworth where we stayed in a pub called the Well Diggers Arms for a few days delightful walking on the South Downs before flying back to Sydney.



Trudy, Adam, Tony and Sally on the South Downs