

JOURNEY TO VIENNA, BERLIN AND ENGLAND - MAY /JUNE 2024

BLOG, 1 AUGUST 2024

This trip was planned more than a year ago as a last taste of my favourite musical cities Vienna and Berlin, and a sentimental return with friends to London and England where I lived for four fabulous years in the 60s. Both group journeys certainly hit the spot and on subsequent reflection were probably the happiest we have ever done. Both filled up quickly after I sent out invitations. I think because we have learnt the essential elements that make up a successful group and journey: a group of like-minded people we know and like; plenty of time for everyone to do their own thing during day time, talks from me for performances, wonderful performances, Sally as hostess and Claudia as organiser and tour manager, though we had to without her in England. I think everyone enjoyed the journeys and I was as happy as a sandboy!

Vienna, Berlin and the Harz Mountains 9-23 May

Sally and I arrived a day early on 8 May via Saigon, Frankfurt and a long rail journey to beautiful Vienna on 8 May, and met most of the group the next morning at the Hotel Royal, our usual place to stay, in the heart of the city, friendly and old-fashioned. Our happy travellers were Sarah Ashmore, Sue Berners-Price, Barbara Beesley, Susie Beaumont, Inese Curtois, Elspeth Drury, David and Marilyn Howorth, Vivienne Del Mar, Kris Neil, Fiorella di Santo, Mark Prior and Gayle Tolifson, Michael Slaytor, and Chris and Sarah Smith. Sadly Rod and Meg Durston had to withdraw because of her illness shortly before our start. The following day after everyone had settled in, as usual we had our Welcome Dinner at Claudia's family restaurant, Beim Czaak, the perfect traditional Viennese restaurant, and with her brother, niece and nephew cooking and serving. It was the happiest and most convivial beginning and we walked back to the hotel with starry eyes!

10 May, Vienna

The next morning began the daily ritual of walking from our hotel a kilometre down the Central shopping street Kärntnerstrasse to the eternally grand Vienna State Opera. Only that morning we went to the newly opened and refurbished Wien Museum that traces the complete history of Vienna from pre-historic times to the present. The last century was especially interesting and some of us were surprised at the rather matter of fact descriptions of Austria's involvement in WW2 and the treatment of Jews- so different from the hand on heart acceptance of guilt seen in Berlin and Germany.

Australian *enfant terrible* Barrie Kosky's new production of Mozart's ever-enduring masterpiece Marriage of Figaro was our first performance and what a delight it was. Updated to something like the present and played and sung with tremendously verve and modern sensibility, it captured the spirit of the opera to perfection with gorgeous playing from the Vienna Philharmonic in the pit. In warm clear weather we walked back along Kärntnerstrasse on a high then up to the top balcony bar for a night cap.

11 May, Vienna

A beautiful sunny and warm day, where we walked through the city to catch a tram to a wooded suburb and visited a grand old house, Geymüllerschloß, the home of a magnificent collection of Biedemeyer clocks and furniture. It was odd as it was mixed, piece by piece with a collection from a young prize winning dress designer of up to the minute esoteric filmy clothes, hats and jewellery. All of this was presented only in German, and the apparent only function of staff was to keep telling us not to touch any exhibit.

Sally and I went to lunch back on the roof terrace of our hotel with two of our group Gayle and Mark. In the evening we all attended a great performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin* in a new production by the much admired opera production team of Wieler, Morabita and Viebrock. We

saw their *Meistersinger* last year and were not impressed with their update from a mediaeval village to a modern tertiary music department. But this *Lohengrin* avoided the traditional setting of mythical swans and silver clad knights and gave us a highly dramatic setting from a harsh but non-specific period. I think I got sunstroke from our top terrace lunch as I fell asleep half way through the opera and had to leave and return to the hotel! The cast was splendid especially Anja Kampe as Ortrud and Malin Bystrom as Elsa. Apparently the applause for the conductor Christian Thielemann at the end was endless, but sadly for me, by then I was tucked up in bed!

12 May, Vienna

Today the group went walking in the woods and forests of Vienna and saw the famous castle of the princess Sisi but I had a quiet day to recover from the day before. At night

At The Tempest - note mirror effect on stage

it was another special performance at the State Opera: *The Tempest*, the much lauded opera by British composer Thomas Ades in the joint production with the Met in New York by Robert Lepage,



premiered now nearly 20 years ago. Conducted by Ades himself, it was in turn powerful, entertaining and highly original, no wonder it is being spoken of as the best British opera of modern times. It was strange to hear English sung at the Vienna State Opera but the effect was anything but English.

The libretto by Meredith Oakes is not based on Shakespeare's words. Prospero sung by Adrian Erod is less the traditional philosopher, but a more fatalistic person, angry with the stealing away (as he sees it) of his daughter Miranda and seems to adopt a vengeful position. The Ariel sung by Caroline Wettergreen was marvellous both in her extraordinary flying acrobatics and her penetrating high soprano.

13 May Vienna

The fourth day in a row at the Vienna State Opera! Almost unprecedented for any one except a member of the company. During the day it was up for everyone to suit themselves, do some shopping or visit a gallery or institution of their choice apart from Claudia taking the group to enjoy a traditional Viennese coffee house. Sally and I went on our own to visit our dear friend Monika Cole-Schindler, now retired to Vienna after a life time as a linguist dividing her time between London and Vienna.

Caroline, Susie and others of our group at Otello

The *Otello* kept the record intact of four superb productions on successive nights in Vienna. Andreas Schafer, one of the top heldentenor of our day was a terrific and convincing Otello, and Australian Nicole Car, now a star in Europe, gave her 2nd performance, following her debut four days earlier in the role of Desdemona. She was perhaps the best Desdemona I've ever seen: strong and loving, devastated by Otello turning against her but no milksop, and a ringing timbre to her voice.



14 May, en route to Berlin

A most enjoyable day, a paean to Claudia's efficiency. At nine in the morning all twenty of us were lined up outside the Hotel Royal in central Vienna, filled with nice breakfasts, ready to board six taxis arriving for us to take us to the Hauptbahnhof for the train to Berlin. In half an hour we were on our way in comfortable seats, luggage safely stowed and soon whizzing through pretty Austrian than German countryside. It's the best way to really get to know each other, talking about what we have seen, what we are about to see and find out who the person next to you really is. It's a long journey and we didn't arrive in Berlin's swanky HauptBahnhof until late in the afternoon and strolled to a fleet of taxis to take us to our hotel. A luscious dinner in a nice restaurant in the Gendarmenmarks near Unter den Linden completed a surprisingly pleasant travel day.



15 May in Berlin

Berlin has become my favourite city. Having visited it most years (sometimes twice) since 2014 when we started doing our group musical trips, we have got to know it well. The central boulevard Unter den Linden leading east from the Brandenburg Gate, for 40 years the centre of East Berlin, is now as elegant and full of fascinating buildings, destinations and just to stroll as anywhere in Europe. Musically it's unrivalled anywhere, with three full time professional opera companies, eight full time orchestras both for the concert stage and opera and ballet, but it's much more than just institutional excellence, it's full of buzz, young people, students and people enjoying its informal ambience and urban precincts to shop, eat and chat.

It was an odd start to our week in Berlin to visit historic

Tempelhof airport, for most of the mid 20th century, Berlin's main airport, now a vast aviation museum, as big as two race courses, a huge insight into the way aviation and air travel developed. Very plain, not at all glamorous, very old German. After a couple of hours, I was glad to get back to central Berlin, and to prepare for an evening *Inese, Susie, Sally at Tempelhof* concert that was as musically delicious as it is possible to be: Mozart's last three and greatest symphonies, 39, 40 and 41 the Jupiter, composed in six inspired weeks, played by the incomparable Mahler Chamber Orchestra under Sir Simon Rattle, walking benevolently under his shaggy bonnet of grey curls amongst the players, and to cap it all, in the prince of concert halls, the Philharmonie, packed to the rafters as it always is, adored by Berlin's music lovers.

Mozart with Simon Rattle and Karajan Academy at the Philharmonie, Berlin



16 May, Berlin.

A sunny Thursday for our group to explore the city at individual pace. As it turned out most of us strolled near the centre visiting art museums, the remarkable Jewish Museum and most of us gathered for a cruise up the Spree river that gives a truly fascination perspective of modern Berlin, its brilliant riverside architecture, institutional buildings and residential areas, and the multiple ways in which the riverside caters for relaxation. Our evening entertainment was different to say the least. 17th Century English composer Henry Purcell's *King Arthur*, referred to as a Semi-Opera. Purcell's *King Arthur* is generally referred to as a Semi-Opera, essentially a spoken



stage work, containing sung and musical numbers by fanciful or supernatural characters, (but not by the main protagonists who speak or declaim the central narrative). It is set to a libretto written by the famous British poet and playwright John Dryden and was first performed in 1691.

Sarah, Sue and myself at King Arthur at the Berlin Konzerthau

The performance was given in the old Konzerthaus, a grand, elaborately decorated 19th century hall with a large flat stage with the highly regarded Berlin Academy for Ancient

Music, RIAS Chamber Choir, directed by Justin Doyle. The Academy of about 20 musicians was seated on the side of the stage and started playing an elegant baroque intro with a single person, presumably from the choir, moving about singing a solo. After a short while, I said to myself, this looks a worry, it seems the most anti-dramatic presentation you could imagine. How wrong I was! The chamber choir, Berlin's best, gave a wonderfully histrionic performance of this crazy baroque opera with no holds barred and we all walked out at the end amused and delighted by a virtuoso performance the like of which I doubt any of us had ever seen.

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18 May - Berlin

We have just enjoyed two concerts at the Philharmonie, the first given by the Karajan Akademie at the Kammermusiksaal (the small hall), no doubt appropriate for the small orchestra which is the Karajan academy, a graduate orchestra for the Berlin Philharmonic, a great idea so that the best young musicians get real time experience before competing for jobs in the BPO itself. The concert was mostly two chamber works without conductor that most of us found fairly ordinary but Mendelssohn's Italian symphony brought the whole orchestra

together under the BPO's musical director, Kirill Petrenko, and this was far more exciting and brought wild applause.

The next evening we were back at the Philharmonie with the BPO itself conducted by leading French conductor Francois-Xavier Roth. As usual the hall was packed for what turned out to be two major works of huge contrast. Bruckner's 3rd of nine large scale late-romantic symphonies was full of huge brass dominated passages praising the Lord alternating with long swooning melodic string passages, also praising the Lord. I enjoy Bruckner especially when played as well as this, but I think some of the group found it hard going. By contrast, after the interval, we had the world premiere of *Anemoi* a large scale work by young Slovenian composer Vito Zuraj. This was a sensational piece imagining the gods of the winds of the natural world, using the individual instruments and the ensemble. It gave a vivid sense of drama presented through a spectrum of sounds unlike normal instrumental sonority. Zuraj has written several works in recent years that have brought him international attention. He certainly has a major career ahead of him.

As we approached the Philharmonie that evening, two of the group, Marilyn and David Howorth tripped and fell on the footpath, David hurting his hands breaking his fall and also suffering a back eye. A nearby doctor was quickly on the spot and a quick examination revealed no serious damage but Claudia, Sally and I said to the Howorth's the next day that given David's poor health they may be best to stay in Berlin or for them both to return to Melbourne when the group travelled by coach the next day to the Harz mountains. However David showed no other ill effects the next day and they joined the group on the journey to the Harz on Monday 20 May.

Sunday 19 May in Berlin

For our last day in Berlin, everyone went their own way, but in the evening we walked together to Unter den Linden to the city's oldest

Opera House, Staatsoper Berlin for a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Over the last 10 years, the House has been totally renovated and now looks and feels gracious and elegant. My first visit to the Staatsoper about 10 years ago, we saw a *Rosenkavalier* that was unbelievably shabby with mould in the ceiling, chairs falling to pieces, but now it is totally transformed to suit its historic dignity. The production was the last of a series of new productions organised by their life long artistic director Daniel Barenboim of Mozart's great Da Ponte (librettist) operas *Marriage of Figaro*, *Così fan Tutte* and *Don Giovanni*, all with French Stage Director Vincent Huguet.

His idea was to portray them as a sequence in moving from youth to maturity based on the idea behind French philosopher Michel Foucault's large 1970s tract *Sexuality and Truth*. They are all set in the present day: *Così fan tutte* is about the love and turmoil of youth and self-discovery, set in the hippy era, *Figaro* concerns the challenges of adulthood – marriage, affairs, midlife crises and, finally, an ageing Don Giovanni questions himself and tests his erotic prowess. He appears as a thoroughly nasty murderous character treating women as pawns. It was certainly not not a “bucolic comedy” as it has always been described.

Sally in Wernigerode

20-23 May Wernigerode, Harz Mountains

On Monday morning we were greeted outside the hotel by a large bus to take us on a 3 hour journey to Wernigerode in the Harz Mountains: a peaceful journey on a fine day into the mountains.

Wernigerode and neighbouring towns in the Harz comprise a favourite German tourist area of lovely historic towns with gorgeous walks, magnificent views and plenty of fine dining. We were there for three days, walked, climbed (not too high!), ate well but the main highlight was to catch the ancient steam train on a narrow gauge line to the Brocken, the highest point in the whole of the Harz mountain region.



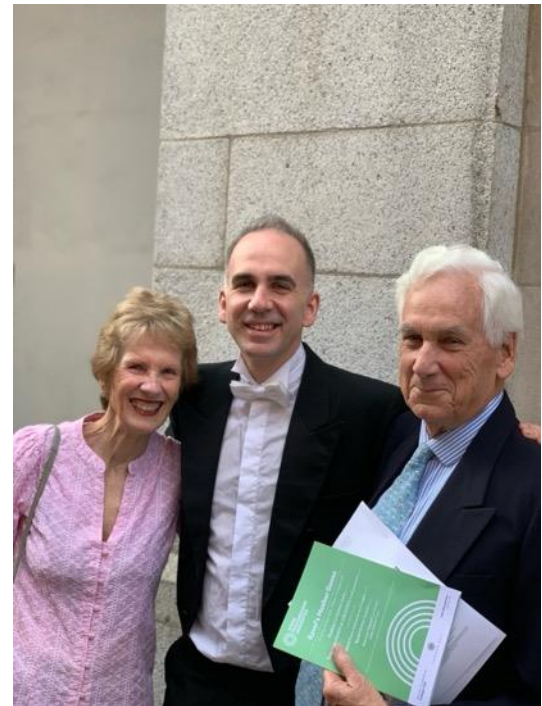
What a great experience that was. The clanking, swaying train with a constant smell and feel of coal smoke was exciting in itself; so was standing on the platforms linking the carriages watching the valleys recede and the mountains emerge. But it was increasingly distressing to see huge swathes of forest and entire hillsides of leafless or dying mature trees that became more extensive the higher we got. We were told it is caused by a particular bark beetle that eats the bark of entire forests and effectively ringbarks the trees. We were told a partial cause is that these mostly native forests are limited to one or two tree species and if there was greater diversity in these forests, the damage would be more limited. When we reached the top there were walks everywhere we could take, all with superb views, view towers and cafes. Several of the hardy amongst us, including Sally, decided to walk back to Wernigerode (or back to a station half way down) when they decided enough was enough!

London, 23-25 May

We had a dilemma at the end of our wonderful trip to Vienna and Berlin and the Harz Mountains. Adam had a concert in London with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at the Cadogan Hall the same day we left the Harz to return to Berlin with the group. He had been working with the RPO many times in the last year or two and rang me and said you have never heard me with the RPO and must come to the concert. Must I? And how do we get there from the Harz the same day? We could get our coach to Berlin by about 1 pm and booked the only possible flight from Berlin to London that we could get to and would arrive in time (theoretically). Research told me if we arrived on time the only option was to get the Piccadilly tube from Heath Row to Green Park in the West End, change to Pimlico, run to our hotel with our bags or try to get a taxi to the concert and try to check all our baggage at the box office, or more likely hang around in London and meet Adam after the concert. Miraculously, all went like clockwork

and we arrived with enough time to have a drink in the foyer with our friends the Neill's and Landau's.

'Our hotel, grandiosely called the St Georges in St Georges Place in Pimlico was a splendid white Georgian terrace house as primitive inside as it was grand outside, the sole receptionist being a friendly young Indian woman who told us her father couldn't manage it any more so had given it to her. We had two enjoyable nights there before resuming our crazy itinerary, enough time to enjoy a delicious dinner with Lorraine and Peter Landau at the *Ivy* in Victoria Street.



Tallinn Estonia - 25-30 May

The next day we set out early from Liverpool St Station to a so-called London airport nearly three hours north east of London, Stanstead, where Ryan Air lives and breathes. I was surprised to learn that Ryan Air, for all its dubious *el cheapo* reputation, is now Britain's biggest airline. Our flight to Tallinn in Estonia was on time and Adam and Trudy were there to meet us and chaperone us to our hotel, wisely changed at the last minute from our original booking on Adam's recommendation. We had a lovely few days there wandering along the seafront, strolling the beautiful gardens near our hotel, eating out with Adam and Trudy at a couple of very acceptable restaurants and enjoying this attractive and friendly city.

Trudy was to give her Master's Degree Graduation recital two or three days after we were scheduled to return to London, so we decided to drive to the other end of Estonia to Voru where she gave her final rehearsal recital at the Conservatorium in Voru where she had originally trained and where now she is on the academic staff. This was quite an experience. We decided to hire a car the Estonian way (at least

Sally decided). It is all done virtually: you book the car on the App and the company/owner leaves the car at a nominated address. Through the App you open and enter the car, find the key, photo the car for any damage on all sides, and drive away, leaving it when finished in the same spot, photoing it again from every angle. Only it didn't work like that. The car was not at the place it was meant to be and we wasted well over an hour walking all over Tallinn, being told where it really was, even though it was still not at the place they told us. We were furious and eventually on the third or fourth go, we found it and set off to Voru, over 250 Ks away, as far as Sydney to Canberra. Sally was the nominated driver and drove the whole way, along a mostly flat but picturesque landscape. Voru is a pretty but quite small town, though the Conservatorium is a fine building with a very nice if smallish recital hall. Trudy played several pieces with great panache and confidence to the delight and praise of the principal and her senior colleagues and Trudy's parents and her youngest two sisters, Matilda and Hja-Marie who live in a nearby town. Sally drove all the way back to Tallinn in the evening taking Trudy with us, despite my frequent offers to share the driving to give her a break. She is a stubborn and determined woman.

London 30 May -1 June

On 30 May, we flew back to London to stay with our dear English friends Vickie and Andrew Neill in Wandsworth, whom we have known for nearly 40 years when we first met when he was posted to Sydney for three years from his London head office. Their big family house overlooking a large thriving garden of gorgeous shrubs, trees and flowers is so familiar to us from countless visits over the years that they seem like neighbours rather than friends from the other side of the world. Their two daughters, Anna and Sally and their husbands and little children also are dear to us and on this trip, we visited them at their houses they have each recently bought.

But the next day Sally (Jeffrey), always peripatetic, caught a train to Dorset to catch up with an old friend Gilly Webster who was her flatmate when they lived in London in their 20s and hadn't seen for very many years. Meanwhile that morning Andrew asked me to go with him to the BBC where he was to record a talk he was giving on English music. I waited for him in the foyer and strolled around Portman Place and other long ago familiar haunts in the central West End. We then walked down Regent Street to Pall Mall where he took me to lunch at the Athenaeum Club, elegant haunt of many generations of English artists and gentlemen involved in the arts, and where we met my old ACO colleague Tim Walker also visiting from Australia.

With Jonathan and Isobel at the Old Rectory, near Frome 2-4 June

The garden at the Old Rectory, near Frome



We had invited ourselves to visit my stepbrother Jonathan (Jonty within the family) and his wife Isobel. It is worth telling their story briefly. My mother and Jonathan's father, both widows with children, but long time family friends, married in 1958 as 50ish lonely people. Jonathan, nine years old and ten years younger than me, was brought up by my mother. When he left school he was expected to study law and then join his father's legal firm, but he firmly resisted this and took off to England where he studied acting and theatre at RADA. His career as a stage actor in companies like the Glasgow Citizens, National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company gave him an international reputation and eventually he was swept up in cinema and made many famous Hollywood films such as *Jumanji*,

Richie Rich and Titanic, usually playing very British characters. In 1978, before his Hollywood career I encouraged Australia Opera CEO Peter Hemmings to engage Jonathan (whose work he knew) in the new production of Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream* in the speaking part of Puck. In Sydney in this opera he met the brilliant young Scottish soprano Isobel Buchanan, star and toast of Australian Opera audiences who sang Hermia in the same production. Predictably, they fell in love and Jonathan, much to the disappointment of her Australian audience, whisked her off to Europe and the UK where she became an international star. Now they live semi-retired from the stage in the lovely Old Rectory, their new home in Wiltshire, new for them, but not in the least new in itself, a gorgeous old stone house in a magnificent garden with green lawns flanked by great banks of purple rhododendrons in full bloom and dense woods on all sides. It is located next to the Marquess of Bath's remarkable property Longleat where he has his Lion Zoo. For me who has known them both closely since before they met each other and hasn't seen them for many years, it was a super special reunion. The four of us hung out together for several days, walking, meeting their friends, enjoying their hospitality but most of all reminiscing about parents, children old mutual friends and their most loved shows and colleagues.

On 5 June, Jonathan drove us to the station with farewell hugs and declarations of staying more in touch. Their daughter Willa has moved to Sydney with her new husband Danny, a great incentive for us to renew family bonds. Adam is determined to visit when next in England and Jonathan and Isobel are hoping to visit Australia in the coming months.

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

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 *Andrew, AJ, Doug, Virginia, Sally and Robin* 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 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' 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 updated 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 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 Piro 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 Piro'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