Editorial Preface

by Patricia Williams

My husband, Bernard Williams, was working on this collection when he was diagnosed with cancer. Acknowledging that time might be running out, he focussed on completing his final philosophical book (*Truth and Truthfulness*, published in 2002), hoping to turn back to writing about opera. Sadly, he died in 2003.

As a teenager in the London suburbs, Bernard fell in love with opera. He collected records and went to performances of the Carl Rosa Company and Sadler's Wells, writing his own 'reviews' of operas and movies in a school exercise book. Many years later, to his great delight, he was appointed to the Board of the English National Opera (then Sadler's Wells) and later chaired the opera committee for three years when George (Lord) Harewood was managing director and after the company moved to its present home at the London Coliseum. Ideas for many of the essays in this book were conceived over the twenty years of Bernard's association with ENO during which time we saw almost every new production at ENO, Covent Garden and, later, at Glyndebourne.

George Harewood and his colleagues were devoted to the performance of opera in English so as to bring it to new audiences, to spotting and training talented young singers from Britain and the Commonwealth, and to the *esprit* of the company where rehearsals mattered and no-one flew in to be the star of the evening at the last minute. Artistically and musically, those were wonderful days. At the heart of it all was the brilliant and incredibly hard-working Charles Mackerras (musical director 1970–77) and the remarkable, and remarkably youthful, duo of Mark Elder (musical director from 1979) and David Pountney (director of productions from 1982). Through his pioneering and unforgettable performances, Mackerras had

already introduced Bernard and many others to the operas of Janáček. A performance of *The Makropulos Case* at ENO prompted Bernard to reflect on the tedium of immortality: why the prospect of living forever made life itself meaningless and was therefore intolerable. The essay he later wrote became well known among philosophers but Bernard was more attached to it as a reminder of the inspirational power of Janáček's music.

I shall never forget the tremendous excitement and buzz in the foyer of ENO as bus-loads of people arrived from London and further afield (many of whom would never have gone to the Royal Opera House) to hear the *Ring* in English for the first time. The triumph of Reginald Goodall's *Ring*, completed in 1973, the special 'home-grown' achievement of Alberto Remedios, Rita Hunter, Norman Bailey and many other young singers and players made a whole new generation of Wagnerians of us all, including Bernard: 'On some evenings, when Reginald Goodall's patiently synoptic vision took hold, and Alberto Remedios showed what it is to be that very thing, a truly lyrical "Heldentenor", all the limitations disappeared, the creaking space-age scenery seemed to dissolve into light, and it was as if there were no tomorrow.'

Bernard gained a huge respect for the manifold skills that are vital to the creative, administrative and financial health of an opera house from observing the work and commitment of George Harewood himself, of Edmund Tracey, the wickedly funny and expert dramaturge, translator and supporter of singers, and Arnold (Lord) Goodman, the consummate negotiator and fixer. Extraordinary things were achieved, and in spite of all the familiar constraints of under-funding and financial uncertainty that opera in London faced, then as now.

Life as Provost of King's College, and the company of musical friends and colleagues in Cambridge also played a part in Bernard's thinking about opera. He was deeply proud and protective of the achievements of the Choir, and the role of the College in providing young musicians with a broad education in music and exposure to all a university had to offer before they began the formal rigours of professional training. He, rightly, took no credit for their success but he was delighted that former students and choristers – Robert Tear, John Eliot Gardiner, Andrew Davis, James Gilchrist, Judith Weir, Mark Padmore, George Benjamin, Gerald Finley, Matthew Best, Thomas Adès, Paul Daniel, Edward Gardner, Christopher Gillett and so many others – go on to make their names in the world of opera and music. Jonathan Miller's production, for Kent Opera, of *Così fan*

tutte in Cambridge, prompted Bernard to think more about ‘the problem’ of Mozart’s great opera. Opera was one of the many interests he and Jonathan shared and discussed over the years.

As a philosopher, Bernard was concerned with life and how it should be lived, with notions of truth and authenticity, with the role of luck in moral and political thought, with conflicting moral obligations in public and private life and with virtues and vices – in classical Greece, the Enlightenment, the Europe of Nietzsche and Wagner and the contemporary world. Such matters are at the very heart of opera as a dramatic art.

Barry Stroud, a fellow philosopher, has paid tribute to the grounded humanity of Bernard’s philosophy:

He brought human life into philosophy, and so into the philosophy of all of us . . . The aspects of humanity he tried hardest to make sense of are among its most puzzling and difficult: the need to answer the question of how best to live, and then how to understand the possibility of so many different and equally defensible answers to the question. The challenge was always to make sense of humanity itself. Nothing transcendent, no principles of disembodied ‘reason’ or impersonal ‘utility’, will do. The answers can lie only within what is true of thinking and feeling human beings, their cultures and their histories and their aspirations.

He brought human life into philosophy in another and more personal and so more immediate way. He exuded life itself in his own philosophising, as in everything else he did . . . You could not fail to be enlivened by his company and moved by the sheer enjoyment he felt for whatever engaged him. With Bernard, philosophy, for all its difficulty and seriousness, was filled with life, and it was fun.

Iain Fenlon, a musicologist, also recalled what fun it was to share Bernard’s passion for opera: ‘Sheer delight, a sense of wonder at what music can do was immediately evident in Bernard’s infectious reactions to performance.’ He emphasised Bernard’s fascination with ‘the immediacy and the power of its [music’s] emotional purchase, the ability of music to move both the heart and the intellect’.

But readers will find that it never was, or is, necessary to be well informed, or in the business either of music or philosophy, to enjoy these essays. When I first met Bernard he took me to a performance of *Tristan* at Covent Garden. So ignorant was I about opera then that it never

occurred to me to wonder whether this choice of work or composer might be rather a test of our very new friendship. I never ceased to adore talking to Bernard about opera from that night on. Re-reading these essays is a vivid reminder of his gift for sharing his thoughts and his pleasures. I hope old friends and new readers will feel the same.

Editing the text

It is clear from his notes that Bernard had selected the essays for this volume and decided the rough order in which they should appear. He had intended to revise some of them and to add new material.

He would certainly have eliminated or reduced the overlaps and repetitions that are inevitable when essays written over a long period and for different purposes are read, end to end, as a continuous text. Michael Black and I have undertaken some of this work but decided it was preferable to accept a few remaining repetitions than to second guess what Bernard would have done. He might well have substituted alternative examples to illustrate some of the major arguments and themes which run through this collection. It is clear from his notes that one or two of the essays on Wagner, or on Wagner in combination with other composers, would have been merged into new and longer pieces.

Doubts were expressed about including the introductory article on 'The Nature of Opera' from *The Grove Dictionary of Opera* because, having been commissioned for a reference book, it is written in a different style from the rest of this collection. But Bernard had included it in his list of contents and several reviewers of the *Dictionary* found it a useful, if somewhat idiosyncratic, *tour d'horizon* for the general reader.

Bernard clearly intended to revise 'Rather Red than Black', the essay on Verdi, to take account of more recent scholarly work by Roger Parker and John Rosselli on the 'political' character of Verdi's early operas such as *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi*. But it was impossible to make out from his notes what he would have said. We hope the original (hitherto unpublished) essay will still give pleasure to a general audience without being seriously misleading.

Readers who are familiar with the published version of Bernard's commentary on *Opera and Ideas* by Paul Robinson (Chapter 12) will notice we have made cuts here to avoid excessive overlap with 'Tristan and Time'.

We added the text of a more recent lecture (Chapter 15) to a gathering of musicologists because the ideas are of general interest to interpreters of music – conductors, singers, players and directors – as well as to their audiences. The aim is to outline the role of the musicological study of opera and the performance of opera; to distinguish between the different and distinctive conceptions of ‘authenticity’ which appropriately apply to music, to literary text and to music drama; and to touch on the complex problem of what might count as an artistic intention and what artistic aims at a given time for a given composer were even possible:

We have seen in the opera house in recent years the co-existence of two kinds of radicalism: an increasing ‘authenticity’ of orchestral and vocal performance, based on historical research, and productions and sets that display all degrees of rethinking and creativity up to the now notorious extremes of directorial whimsy . . . What is significant in this is that two kinds of radicalism can combine to the same end – an uncluttered seemingly transparent enactment of what this particular work is.

Although addressed to an academic audience, it is a good example of how philosophical skill can help to clarify notoriously confusing problems in a subject of general interest to music lovers.

I am very grateful to Michael Tanner for writing an introduction to the collection. I hope readers who look forward to Michael’s opera reviews in the *Spectator* will be tempted by his recommendation to enjoy and argue with Bernard, as he himself did for so many years.

Keith Thomas put me on the spot, and spurred me on, when, at the memorial for Bernard at All Souls College, he expressed the hope that this volume would be published. Alexander Goehr was extremely encouraging when I had almost lost heart. Alison Latham’s extensive editorial experience was very helpful. Iain Fenlon took enormous care in advising Yale University Press and helped to define what this book is about.

Robert Baldock’s continuing enthusiasm and confidence in this project has meant a lot to me, and I am grateful for the care he and his colleagues at Yale University Press have devoted to it.

My greatest debt is to Michael Black – a staunch friend to us both from our earliest days. The combination of his editorial skill, judgement and musical knowledge has been essential to the enterprise.