

# BANDANNA

The North Cheshire Concert Band is currently busy rehearsing for the European première of the 'wind band opera' *Bandanna*, with music by Daron Hagen and libretto by Paul Muldoon, originally commissioned by the College Band Director's National Association in 1997. *Bandanna* is the NCCB's most ambitious project to date, following several seasons of concerts at the Pyramid Arts Centre in Warrington that have highlighted the diversity of the existent repertoire that is accessible to community bands and the standards that are achievable by such groups. Over the past decade, under the direction of Mark Heron, the NCCB has moved into a prime position as a leading cultural provider within Warrington. As Heron points out, despite the proximity of the town to the bright lights of Liverpool and Manchester, there is clearly a need for the development of local culture that is easily accessible to the community.

Debates surrounding the accessibility of opera are often highly charged, as opera continues to be widely regarded as the embodiment of high art. In a perceptive essay entitled '*Expecting Rain: Opera as Popular Culture?*', the cultural theorist John Storey identifies the commercial origins of opera, which was established by the nineteenth century as a widely available form of popular entertainment consumed by people of all social classes. In Britain in the nineteenth century opera was an integral part of popular culture – it was performed in music halls, and melodies were heard in arrangements for brass bands and on barrel organs on street corners. In the UK and America, opera became separated from everyday life through its institutionalisation within the opera house. The subsequent development of specific codes of social behaviour for audiences, and the predominance of foreign-language operas, which were upheld as the best and most authentic examples of the genre, rendered the art form inaccessible to all but the most educated members of society. In effect, although the high art status of opera was demonstrably 'invented', this perception has remained influential on potential audiences today.

Storey points out that although opera has achieved a more popular audience in recent times, it may still be necessary for audiences to do their 'opera homework', aided and abetted by one of the many beginner's guides that are now available. The opera companies themselves have also had a role to play in developing and tutoring their audiences, and have undertaken some excellent education work. Although reduced-price ticket schemes have increased the accessibility of opera performances, underlying social factors remain which may discourage even a potential audience member who has money to spend on entertainment from attending an opera as opposed to a pop concert or a football match.

A pertinent comparison can be made between opera and musical theatre, which has continued to flourish in venues within yards of the Coliseum and the Royal Opera House in London's West End. A

record attendance of 12 million people attending West End shows in 2002 is set to be beaten in 2005. Often, musical theatre is virtually indistinguishable from some contemporary opera (other than by a formal definition based on the incorporation of spoken dialogue in the former as opposed to recitative in the latter). Even long-running popular favourites such as *Les Misérables* utilise aspects of traditional opera aesthetic and musical style. Yet just as opera can be pigeon-holed as elitist, musical theatre can be subject to small-minded criticism that cannot comprehend a world where commercial popularity is compatible with artistic merit. Even outside the canon of works by the 'culturally acceptable' music theatre composers, there are examples of new musicals playing to packed houses which demonstrate rich development of plot and character, stylistic diversity, inventive orchestration and superlative performances on the stage and in the pit. I am thinking here particularly of Stephen Schwartz's *Wicked* which I was fortunate enough to see on Broadway earlier this year.

It is not surprising that opera companies have been quick to pick up on factors that have enabled musicals to attract a wide audience. *Jerry Springer: the Opera* achieved a sold-out run (despite, or maybe because of, a fair amount of controversy) at the National Theatre and then transferred to the West End. Success in this case seemed to result from the fusion of the operatic genre with a modern dramatic idiom: the talk show. However, the fusion is not always so successful when modern elements are grafted onto nineteenth century repertoire in a bid to highlight the relevance of 'universal' themes to modern society. English National Opera's productions have often benefited from some excellent translations that go some way to preserving the subtleties of meaning and word play inherent in the original libretti. However, ENO's 2002 production of Verdi's *A Masked Ball* featuring singers sitting on lavatories was a box office failure. Recently, Glyndebourne Touring Opera's *Tangier Tattoo*, with music by John Lunn, was conceived as a deliberate attempt to woo what is described as a 'lost generation' of 18-30 year olds. *Tangier Tattoo* tells the story of Nick, a backpacker who becomes involved with the drugs trade and gun crime. Critic Tom Service, who attended the opera with members of the up-and-coming rock band the Suffrajets, revealingly portrayed the problems with the concept and substance of the piece in an article in the *Guardian* last October. Most notable in the Suffrajets' comments on the experience were feeling out of place in the rarefied atmosphere of the opera house, and patronised by the attempts to make opera more relevant to them. One member commented: 'It seemed insulting to my intelligence ... I know what real opera is like, and most people my age will know what opera is, and therefore they're going to look at it and think that wasn't the real thing'.

Twenty-first century audiences are certainly more sophisticated cultural consumers than some artists

may realise. Daron Hagen, however, is clearly in tune with the reality of the modern world, commenting perceptively in an interview that 'the MTV generation is comfortable processing a much more complex musical 'mix' than prior generations'. I have been fortunate enough to hear a preview of a forthcoming recording of *Bandanna*, and it is not surprising, then, to find that the piece is wholly convincing as a modern opera, ranging stylistically from the music theatre of Gershwin, Bernstein and Sondheim, to traditional mariachi music and contemporary opera of Benjamin Britten. Hagen, who served his apprenticeship on Broadway, acknowledges that holistically the piece falls between opera and music theatre. Mark Heron notes that it is 'helpful to be able to market the Broadway qualities of the piece' whilst at the same time there is plenty for himself and the performers to get their teeth into. Dealing with the work's stylistic diversity is the fundamental interpretative question that the piece throws up for Heron. He notes that it is helpful that 'modern vocal training at conservatoires such as the Royal Northern College of Music [the institution from which the production's soloists are drawn] allows singers to be sufficiently flexible to move more easily from one style to the other'. Moreover, Hagen's style encourages audiences to be actively involved in constructing their own meanings from the richness of the textual and musical cross-references in the work.

*Bandanna* is the story of a chief of police, Miguel Morales, and two officers who once served with him in Vietnam and who now work with him in a small town on the Texas Mexican border. During the long hot summer of 1968, Jake, who is resentful of Cassidy's advancement over him, is playing a dangerous double-role as policeman and guide to successive groups of illegal immigrant workers. With the encouragement of a morally bankrupt union organizer, Kane, Jake determines to convince Morales that his wife, Mona, is having an affair with Cassidy. In the end, groundless jealousy provokes Miguel to strangle his wife with her own bandanna, shoot his colleague, and ultimately, himself. Although it is of course the singers that take centre stage in an opera, Hagen uses the wind orchestra as much more than functional accompaniment. The influence of Wagner's compositional ideal of the music-drama is apparent in the symbolic 'bandanna chord', the developmental use of specific orchestral palettes to underscore particular characters, and instrumental music to provide a subtextual insight into the characters' minds.

As Heron points out, it is relatively rare for amateur wind players to get the chance to accompany opera, and the NCCB is clearly ready to respond to this new challenge. Rehearsals will bring the band together with soloists from the RNCM and a chorus from the Manchester Chamber Choir for the performance on Saturday 29th April. For Heron, involving musicians from throughout the musical community is key to the success of the project from which everyone involved stands to benefit. For young professional conductors such as himself, the opportunities to conduct opera are hard to come by. Similarly, even at an institution with such a strong reputation for operatic training such as the RNCM, the opportunities for singers to take lead roles during their time at college may be limited and such projects provide invaluable experience. The NCCB has enjoyed an excellent relationship with the RNCM, whose students have provided both vocal and instrumental soloists for many of the NCCB's previous concerts. Heron points to the mutual benefits of this arrangement: 'not only does it give the students an opportunity to play a concerto, but they provide examples for band members to aspire to in their own playing'. In his opinion, soloists are not used enough in wind band concerts whereas concerti are often the big attraction for amateur orchestras.

Heron would certainly concur with Molière's pronouncement that 'of all the noises known to man, opera is the most expensive', with *Bandanna* involving six soloists, a chorus, répétiteur and director in addition to the NCCB's normal resources. Heron argues that although many may be critical of the lack of funding for the arts, there is money available through the Arts Council for innovative projects that promote

North Cheshire Concert Band

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by Daron Hagen

"Mr Hagen has a gift for the big tune"  
New York Times

"Hagen's music blends idioms - Gershwin, jazz, Broadway - with soaring melodies"  
The Times

Soloists from RNCM Opera Department  
Manchester Chamber Choir  
Conductor Mark Heron

Tickets £8 £7 £3



7.30PM SATURDAY 29 APRIL - PARR HALL, WARRINGTON

cultural development within specific communities. The NCCB has been the recipient of several Arts Council awards, including one for *Bandanna*, on top of a National Lottery award to purchase instruments in 2000. Warrington Borough Council's Cultural Services Department have been long-term supporters and partners of the NCCB, alleviating the financial risk involved in promoting the concert series.

Professional arts organisations throughout the country have been forced to re-evaluate their role in society in recent times, and are now required to actively address issues of accessibility and education, whilst continuing to provide performances of the highest possible standard. Although this refocusing has led to some remarkable initiatives throughout the country, it is clear that amateur music making must continue to be given the resources to be allowed to flourish. Amateur projects have some significant advantages over arts outreach and education initiatives in that organisations are often firmly embedded within communities that otherwise may have little opportunity to experience live concerts or, more to the point, an opera production. Projects such as *Bandanna* therefore have a vitally important role to play in the cultural life and musical education in the UK, and are within reach of many community groups.

## References

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