

# LIONEL FRIEND



## Thoughts from the Podium - May 2014 Lionel Friend, conductor

**IT'S BEEN A FULL TWELVE MONTHS**, I'm glad to say, with some truly thrilling moments. Maxwell Davies's *The Lighthouse* with student forces at the Royal Academy of Music was a sensation, performers and audiences overwhelmed by the power of this sinister, gripping work, and it was staged with brilliant imagination by John Ramster. I was so disappointed not to be able to accept the invitation to conduct another production with them this year, because of a prior commitment to Copenhagen.

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**THE HONOUR OF GIVING** the world premiere of an orchestral work by Benjamin Britten was a high point indeed. This was *Chaos and Cosmos*, a tone-poem written when he was just 13 years old, an astonishing feat of creativity - how could he command a musical language so early on? The two worlds he conjures up in this work are very convincingly portrayed by his precociously gifted orchestral writing. The symphony orchestra of Birmingham Conservatoire gave a splendid performance that was embedded in a programme of music by other favourite British composers of mine, Delius and Tippett.

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**TEACHING, HELPING** and working with students in London, Birmingham and elsewhere has been an important part of my life for many years, and shortly after conducting a reprise of Penderecki's *The Devils of Loudun* in Warsaw, I was excited to make my first visit to China for two weeks in November to work with a student symphony orchestra at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. We were to pre-

pare and give a concert entirely devoted to music by Benjamin Britten that had been arranged by the British Council and the Britten-Pears Foundation in celebration of the composer's centenary.

A challenging programme had been chosen by the Chinese - somewhat too challenging, it turned out - that included the Violin Concerto (played by one of their professors, who was excellent), the *Sinfonia da Requiem* and *The Young Person's Guide*. It was frustrating for the orchestra (and there were some talented players) and for me to realise that it was all rather too difficult. And unfortunately the Conservatory failed to provide me with an interpreter, so communication between us was very limited; I had to view the outcome as disappointing. However, I like to think that this contact with Britten's music will remain a significant event for the participants.

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**IT WAS UNUSUALLY DAUNTING** to note that I had no fewer than three new operas to learn for 2014, two of which I had never seen or heard, and the other only once. For someone with already more than 40 years in the profession, this was an unexpected, though stimulating, challenge! For British Youth Opera in September I have been studying Jonathan Dove's *L'augellino verde* (The little green swallow).

I'm very pleased to conduct another opera of his, having very much enjoyed *Mansfield Park* with the Royal Academy two years ago. British Youth Opera is a thoroughly worthwhile and ambitious enterprise that with fully realised productions provides a stage for young, talented opera singers on the brink of a professional career.

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Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* at the Royal Danish Opera. Photo © Miklos Szabo

**FOR THE ROYAL DANISH OPERA** I have been conducting a series of performances of Gershwin's wonderfully fresh and original *Porgy and Bess*. As legally required, a cast of coloured singers - principals and chorus - was engaged, and they have spent three and a half months in the Danish capital giving no fewer than 30 evenings, all sold out! It's been my good fortune to preside over more than half of these, and getting to know Gershwin's surprisingly complex and intricate score, lit up, of course, with some of the most famous and beloved melodies of the 20th century, has been a joy. Such skill, such imagination!

I got a buzz when it dawned on me that Gershwin really knew his Wagner. Yes, there are Leitmotifs, which he knows how to manipulate into new combinations, new tempi, new moods. And I've been struck, too, by his contrapuntal writing and by his colourful scoring for the orchestra. The guest casts have performed consistently with infectious energy and enthusiasm, and the members of the Royal Danish Orchestra in the pit have declared themselves thrilled to play it!

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**IT WAS IN THE MIDDLE** of this run that I had the sheer delight of spending two weeks with the Aalborg Symphony who accompanied the Semifinalists and then Finalists for the Lauritz Melchior Wagner Singing Competition. The name of the famous Danish Wagnerian tenor drew an array of gifted singers from around the world. They all sang nothing but Wagner, of course, and it was a huge pleasure for me to rehearse and conduct the scenes with them and the orchestra.

I love rehearsing Wagner with orchestras for whom this music is relatively unknown, such excitement at the discovery! There were also some purely

orchestral excerpts, and the two concert evenings were on a very high level. A wonderful Finnish soprano, Tiina-Maija Koskela, took First Prize as well as the Audience Prize. For me it was also very pleasant to renew acquaintance with some members of the very distinguished jury with whom I had worked some years ago in Bayreuth.

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**THE THIRD OPERA** that's new to me is *The Merchant of Venice* by André Tchaikowsky, a Polish composer from the mid-20th century who had a very successful career as a concert pianist, and at his premature death aged 46 was only beginning to be known widely for what mattered most to him: his own music. He was writing his opera during the last six years of his life, and completed it only just before passing away in 1982. The libretto was "assembled" (most skilfully) from Shakespeare by John O'Brien, and the music is marvellously rich and inventive, showing a huge range of colours and emotions. The two principal roles, Portia and Shylock, are dramatic and on a large scale, both very challenging to sing and act. The writing for all the voices, as well as for the fairly large orchestra, is altogether demanding, virtuosic. But it is by no means all dark: there are comic characters, too, and the young lovers, Jessica and Lorenzo, also have their own kind of music. In late October in Warsaw we shall be showing the opera in Keith Warner's insightful and memorably lively production repeated from the opera's long-delayed premiere in Bregenz last Summer.

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**A FINE AND DISTINGUISHED** English conductor, with whom I managed to study briefly at the Royal College of Music, and whom I came to admire enormously, was Sir Adrian Boult. Although (as he told me once during a College magazine inter-

view) there were two works he would never agree to conduct a second time - and one was Arnold Schönberg's *Variations for Orchestra* - it was his belief that a professional conductor should be able and willing to conduct anything requested of him. I have full respect for this attitude of his but have never been able to share it; for my own successful music making I have to feel some sympathy for and understanding of the composer's work. I received an invitation to conduct a concert in Budapest this last January that would culminate in a performance of Zoltán Kodály's *Burial Prayer*, a masterwork I have conducted three times, including (at the invitation of the composer) at his 60th-birthday concert in Budapest in 1993. I was thrilled to be invited, and immediately asked to see the scores of the other works planned for the programme. The composer of one of them kindly sent me a recording of his piece, but I was dismayed to find it most uncongenial: to me it was a kind of war-mongering fascist march. I told the friend who was responsible for devising the programme that I felt unable to conduct this work; was there another piece of his we could play instead? Regrettably, my friend reported my reaction to the composer himself, and finally to the concert's committee, and I was informed that the invitation to conduct the concert was withdrawn. It was a huge sadness to me, of course, and badly handled.

On a few other occasions I have expressed my regret at not feeling able to do justice to a piece of music (or, indeed, opera) but this demur has always been accepted gratefully, if with some initial disappointment. What composer, I ask myself, wishes to have his music performed by an unsympathetic interpreter? And since when should a musician be expected to play music for which he has no feelings?

Lionel Friend

## Forthcoming projects

### 2014 .....

**September 8, 11, 13**

Dove: *The little green swallow*  
British Youth Opera, London

**October 24, 26, 28, 30**

André Tchaikowsky *The Merchant of Venice*  
Polish National Opera, Warsaw

**November 30**

Jury member,  
Wagner Competition, London

### 2015 .....

**March 18**

Birtwistle, Julian Anderson, Turnage  
Nash Ensemble, Wigmore Hall, London

**June 19**

Stravinsky  
Birmingham Conservatoire SO,  
Birmingham

### Lionel Friend management

Robert Gilder & Company  
91 Great Russell Street  
London WC1B 3PS  
United Kingdom

Phone: +44 20 7580 7758  
Fax: +44 20 7580 7739