

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by Michael Black – 2007 Fellow

The Stuart Leslie Memorial Churchill Fellowship to observe choruses and chorus masters - USA.

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Signed.....

Dated.....

Contents

Introduction and Acknowledgements.....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
Programme.....	5
Main Body.....	6
Conclusions and Recommendations.....	13
Appendix.....	14

INTRODUCTION

The Fellowship enabled me to travel to the US in order to observe and meet with chorus masters and chorus administrators in professional opera companies there. This report provides a summary of not only the schedule of the trip, but also of the lessons learned and applications to the Australian context.

As there is only one professional full time opera chorus in Australia it is imperative for me to travel elsewhere to interact with other chorus masters, choruses and chorus administrators. Whilst much can be done these days to interact with other opera companies via email and even through recordings, nothing can replace being able to hear the sound of an opera chorus live in a rehearsal room or in the theatre. By constantly listening and observing, discussing and debating, musical opinions are formed and reformed, diverse sound colours and nuances are added to the existing palette and musical choices are augmented. This in turn improves the quality of training and the experience of performance for the Opera Australia Chorus and its members.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would also like to gratefully acknowledge Mrs Norma Leslie for providing the Stuart Leslie Churchill Fellowship. Funding for the arts in Australia is at best sparing and generous individuals such as Mrs Leslie enable musicians and artists to look beyond that which is normally possible.

I also extend my appreciation to the Churchill Trust for providing the means for this wonderful experience. Once the plans for this trip began to formalise it became clear that it would be a waste not to continue on to Europe where there are many fine chorus masters and choruses. Even though outside the initial brief, the Churchill Trust generously funded an around the world ticket enabling me to continue this project at the Liceu in Barcelona, The Deutsche Oper in Berlin and the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. In every opera house each administration, chorus master and chorus were exceptionally friendly, welcoming and generous. Special mention must be made of Donald Palumbo, the relatively newly appointed chorus master at the Met, who was incredibly generous with his time and expertise for the entire month I was in NYC.

Finally, a huge thank you to my son Liam and partner Tom for their total support before and during this project.

Executive Summary

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Project Objective

To observe chorus masters, choruses and chorus administrations in professional opera houses in the USA. My particular interest was the chorus at the Metropolitan Opera House in NYC with its new chorus master, Donald Palumbo. My itinerary included San Francisco and New York City (with Barcelona, Berlin and St Petersburg added to the initial project)

Project Highlights

In San Francisco I had the opportunity to attend a full week of music rehearsals of six different operas with one of America's most respected professional choruses.

In New York I was able to attend rehearsals and performances at the Metropolitan Opera for the month I was there and was also able to meet with Mr Palumbo regularly. Also of interest in NYC were performances and meetings at NYC Opera and Opera Orchestra of New York.

Findings and Outcomes

- to incorporate new rehearsal techniques
- to administer new protocols and initiatives for OA Chorus
- to maintain close contact with chorus masters around the world
- to actively pursue exchanges or collaborations with other chorus masters and chorus singers
- to actively incorporate new improved practices in the work place for Australian chorus singers
- to continue the fine work of professional chorus training in Australia

FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME

31st March – 6th April, San Francisco, USA

- Attended music rehearsals for *The Bonesetter*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Ariodante*, *Simon Boccanegra*, *Boris Godunov*, *La bohème* and *Die tote Stadt*
- Meetings with assistant chorus master and both chorus managers

7th April – 13th April, New York City, USA

- Attended music calls for *Entführung aus dem Serail* and *The First Emperor*, Metropolitan Opera House
- Attended performances of *La Bohème* and *Ernani*, Metropolitan Opera House
- Attended performance of *Candide*, New York City Opera
- Attended performance of *Edgar*, The Opera Orchestra of New York
- Meetings with chorus master at Metropolitan Opera
- Attended stage rehearsals for *La fille du régiment* and *Satyagraha*, Metropolitan Opera

14th April – 20th April, New York City

- Attended music rehearsals for *Un ballo in maschera*, *La clemenza di Tito*, *The First Emperor*, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and *Satyagraha* at Metropolitan Opera House
- Attended stage rehearsals for *La fille du régiment* at Metropolitan Opera House
- Attended performance of *Un ballo in maschera* at Metropolitan Opera House
- Meetings with chorus masters of both New York City Opera and Metropolitan Opera

21st April – 27th April, New York City

- Attended performances of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and *Satyagraha* at Metropolitan Opera House
- Attended stage rehearsals of *Entführung aus dem Serail* at Metropolitan Opera House
- Attended music rehearsals of *Macbeth*, *Clemenza*, *First Emperor* at Metropolitan Opera House
- Attended production rehearsals of *The First Emperor*, and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, at Metropolitan Opera House.

28th April – 4th May, New York City

- Attended performances of *La fille du régiment*, *Satyagraha* and *La clemenza di Tito* at Metropolitan Opera House
- Attended stage rehearsals of *The First Emperor* and *La clemenza di Tito* at Metropolitan Opera House

San Francisco Opera

The chorus of the San Francisco opera is in many ways similar to the chorus at Opera Australia. Both contain the same number of fully employed singers and both utilise their singers for roles and covers in addition to their chorus employment. Both are heavily unionised and work under very similar conditions and although the Opera Australia chorus perform many more operas and performances each year, the San Francisco opera chorus is roughly as busy as the OA chorus simply because they spend much more time in rehearsing each opera.

Work in most professional opera choruses in the United States is seasonal work (the Metropolitan Opera being the exception) and even though the same singers are guaranteed work the next season (and thus keeping their much valued and coveted benefits including superannuation and health cover), they usually work somewhere between 8 and 9 months of the year. The San Francisco Chorus works somewhere between eight and nine months of the year but maintain the same members of the chorus with a very limited turn over each year. Jobs for singers are coveted in the US and singers tend to stay in one position for years at a time, even an entire career.

When I arrived in San Francisco the chorus was just arriving back from their uniform annual leave and were embarking on an extensive music rehearsal period for their 2008-9 season, concentrating on the operas that would be performed before the end of 2008 namely *Ariodante*, *Die tote Stadt*, *Boris Godunov*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, *Simon Boccanegra* and *La bohème*. Much music and production time is allotted to each opera (roughly 30% more than at OA) and the rehearsal period for each work is spread over many months. For example *La bohème* does not open onstage until November 2008, but music rehearsals for it begin as early as April.

Whilst the number of full time chorus at San Francisco Opera is the same as that of the OA chorus, they employ extra singers for each production that warrants the size of the larger hall that they perform in (the Sydney Opera Theatre seats roughly 1,200 audience members as opposed to roughly 3,000 at the War Memorial Opera House in SF). With this in mind music rehearsals requiring the full time chorus tend to be scheduled in the day and music calls requiring augmentation are scheduled in the evenings or at weekends when part time singers with employment elsewhere can attend easily.

Unfortunately the week I attended music rehearsals the chorus master, Ian Robertson, was away ill all week. Whilst this was disappointing, this gave me an opportunity to not only see the assistant chorus master Ernest Knell in action all week taking the music rehearsals, but also to chat extensively with the chorus managers Jim Meyer and Ann Hughes about scheduling, work conditions, entitlements and general chorus administration.

One sensitive area in every professional chorus around the world is that of how to end a chorus singer's career with timing and dignity. Most countries around the world have legislated that there be no formal retirement age and this carries through to the operatic world also. However where a principal singer would simply no longer be invited back to a particular opera house, the end of a full time employed chorus singer can be somewhat more problematic. Theoretically a singer could insist on being employed until the day they die, whereas in reality a chorus singer becomes unemployable somewhere between the ages of 55 and 70 depending on voice type, vocal maintenance and technique.

At the San Francisco Opera the full time singers of the chorus are vocally reviewed every two or three years. If the chorus master feels that there is any problem then the singer is told of the problem and given a period of time to fix the problem. During this time they are offered any assistance that may be appropriate and if, at the end of this two years the problem still exists then the singer's employment may be terminated. The singer is then free to challenge the decision in an arbitration court. Interestingly, there seems to be little concern amongst the group at this system; there seems to be a feeling that it is fair to both the individual and the opera company.

One thing that struck me at the music calls I attended is the average age of the San Francisco chorus. Whilst in Australia we have by and large cultivated a culture of a young sounding and young looking chorus, the San Francisco Chorus would be on average perhaps ten years older than the OA Chorus (I suspect that were chorus positions in Australia paid as handsomely as they are in the US then the average age of the OA Chorus may well be a good ten years older than it presently is). This observation presents understandable advantages and disadvantages to consider; sound quality, realism onstage, and ongoing maintenance being just a few. It also formed the basis of many discussions whilst I was there. I am very used to seeing an incredibly young chorus perform energetically on the opera house stage and I have to admit I was more than intrigued and a little disappointed not to have been able to see the San Francisco Chorus onstage presenting perhaps a more realistic picture onstage than I am used to in Sydney.

As one would expect from a professional opera chorus in the US the sung operatic languages are always approached with the benefit of wonderful university training having been undertaken by each member of the group at some point early in, or prior to their career beginning. This is quite different in Australia. Whereas almost without exception these days singers are employed in Australia only if they have been university educated and thus schooled in the languages needed for an operatic

career, this has not always been the case.¹ Many of the more experienced singers in the OA Chorus have learned languages on the job and although they have always learned these languages more than adequately, the increased time (and therefore increased financial resources needed) spent on the music rehearsal in the past has been considerable.

Whilst it was a little difficult to gauge the musical qualities of the San Francisco Chorus from the week I spent there minus their chorus master, the operas I did hear being rehearsed revealed a level of enthusiasm and professionalism entirely unsurprising from a group with this reputation.

New York (The Met)

Perhaps the most important stop on this Churchill Fellowship was always going to be at the Metropolitan Opera House; the busiest and definitely the most innovative opera house in the world. Around 12 months ago they also employed a new chorus master, thus the chorus has been undergoing a great change in this time, a change noted not only within the group but also in the press.

The Metropolitan chorus performs some 26-28 operas each year spread out over an 11 month period. These operas this past year were sung in English, American English, Hindi, Czech, Russian, German, French, and Italian using the same base group of singers, it only being supplemented or divided when the music warranted a larger or smaller number. Thus, this opera chorus has the distinction of being the busiest opera chorus in the world by far. They are also surprisingly the only full time chorus in the US today.

One surprise is that the Met chorus often works 12-13 hour days with minimal break times. In a heavily unionized industry like the arts, this is a phenomenon. Yet their base agreement is a fairly standard 27 hours a week with no more than four performances per week included. On top of this however, management can and do ask them to work well above this limit in exchange for handsome overtime. Asking around the chorus whilst I was there, it would seem that an average chorus singer at the Met would receive somewhere between US\$150,000 - 190,000 annually. Factoring in the various expenses of living in NYC, this makes this chorus the best paid chorus in the world.

¹ Even today if a singer who has been schooled in Victoria is employed today by OA, their level of expertise in the sung languages will usually be considerably less than those who attend universities in either NSW or Qld simply because European languages are an integral part of the courses in these states and not in Victoria.

Yet for years this chorus has not been the envy of the world musically and by performance standards. The press has often been varied for their performances and they have in the past been unfavourably compared to their European counterparts. One reason that this is the case is the obvious fact that they are overworked and, according to conductors, directors and even some of the chorus I spoke with whilst I was there morale has been low in the past whilst at the same time the chorus has not been paid the same rigorous artistic attention that other arms of the company have been paid, such as the Young Artist Programme and the Orchestra.

Vocally speaking the Met Opera Chorus is an embarrassment of riches. Sitting in their music rehearsals I chose to sit next to a different chorus member each day to get an idea of their vocal abilities. With very few exceptions they are a chorus made up of 80 very, very fine voices indeed. They read music well, have a good grasp of the languages required and are thoroughly professional in organisation and in nature. With their new chorus master Donald Palumbo they are now undergoing musical and ensemble changes and it was my interest in observing Donald at work that precipitated my visit. I was able to observe music rehearsals of seven operas, production rehearsals of two operas, stage rehearsals of four opera and performances of seven operas meaning that I was able to witness the operations of the Metropolitan Opera Chorus during one of their busiest times of their year with their new chorus master leading them for the first time.

Donald moved to the Met from the Lyric Opera of Chicago where he says in retrospect he had “a 16 year paid vacation” compared to his work load at the Met. He is incredibly respected in the industry by conductors, directors and chorus singers alike. He is meticulous, thorough, approachable, demanding and tireless in his efforts to lift the standards at the Met. He attends every music rehearsal, production call, stage call and performance which is almost unique amongst chorus masters around the world. Most chorus masters I have observed around the world tend to have respite by giving the assistant chorus master nights in the theatre, rehearsals to take or even complete operas to prepare. Donald is a leader from the front and is as quick to compliment as he is to criticise. His appointment and work over the past year has been instrumental in lifting morale rapidly amongst the group. They feel supported, appreciated and are given firm directives as to their expectations at work.

Musically speaking I learned much from Donald. He is obviously thoroughly prepared and seems incredibly ready for any question thrown at him by 80 singers who know the works as well as himself. His style in the music rehearsals was one of authority and determination and he commands much attention because of this. His method always revolved around approaching the music from the text up and the rehearsal always revolved around an understanding of the text first before a note was sung. He impressively uses this method on works that the chorus had performed sometimes hundreds of times before, therefore insisting on reevaluating a piece of music every time it is rehearsed and performed thereby giving it fresh life each time it is revived.

One area I was thrilled to see so much attention given to during rehearsals was that of the choral sound; something I have been incredibly interested in for years yet have seen so little attention paid to it in my previous travels elsewhere. Donald was always extraordinarily clear in his expectations that the sound produced should be at all times homogenous and beautiful. The colour or timbre of the sound he required was always clearly asked for and ample time was always allowed for the sound or colour to be produced. If there was a misunderstanding or it took some time to achieve the desired result, the time was somehow always available.

Away from the rehearsal room it was interesting to see how this attention to text and sound colour transferred to the nightly performances onstage. Being the busiest professional opera chorus in the world this was not always an easy task and to be honest, not always a successful task. It would seem to me that the sheer number of performances, not to mention the incredibly long working days much of the time precluded this precise rehearsal always being on display for the public. It is interesting that at the Met (and all opera houses I have visited) the orchestra works considerably fewer hours than the chorus meaning they are mostly fresh for a performance whereas the chorus has often been working during the day, sometimes for days on end.

The music calls at the Met were structured differently to those I have encountered in any other opera house. Each call began with notes given for the performances onstage and then the call would consist of two or maybe three operas being rehearsed during the single call. This means that there is a more integrated approach to rehearsals and performances; that the job is seen as a whole, rather than an opera by opera prospect. Usually when an opera opens onstage there is very little that a chorus master can do by way of quality control once the run of an opera begins. By including the performing operas whilst rehearsing the forthcoming operas, the singers are reminded, encouraged and often congratulated on the work they are doing. This in turn creates a more positive work environment, particularly in opera companies where the next opera is always just around the corner.

Whilst this creates all sorts of administrative problems when there are operas being rehearsed that require more or fewer singers than is the norm, it does create rehearsals where there is always a sense of purpose and if one opera seems to be under control, there is more flexibility to move onto the next one. This technique would work well in an opera company such as Opera Australia where the chorus is pretty much the same for each opera and there are always many operas to rehearse and perhaps less so in houses such as San Francisco where there are only a few operas each year to rehearse and extra chorus being used for many of them.

As previously mentioned much is made of the text in the rehearsals I attended, perhaps more so than in any other opera house I have visited. The attention to minute details in the foreign languages is second to none and something that is

streets ahead of many European opera houses I have visited. I observed rehearsals and performances in Sanskrit, Italian, French, English and German, each being given accuracy, life and attention. The chorus is given IPA and literal translations and then given pointers should they need them in the foreign languages. Beyond that the expectation is (and it is largely met) that the singer then maintains this level of proficiency in this language for the course of the rehearsals and performances.

Incredibly useful and informative to me during my time visiting the Met were my informal discussions with Donald. Being the only full time opera chorus master in Australia such discussions are impossible to have locally, so it was wonderful to be able to broach a whole range of topics with him, ranging from musical ones to administrative questions and procedures. He was incredibly open when discussing the problems he has faced during his short time at the Met and his future initiatives to change some of the entrenched musical customs of the house. Probably of most interest were our discussions regarding the sound he was attempting to achieve at the Met with his chorus and how he was going to achieve it. This included many discussions regarding the types of people to employ, the types of voices to employ and then how to best integrate these people into the existing group. Managing the end of a singer's career with dignity was also another topic discussed freely.

The most valuable lessons learned on this time spent at the Met are ironically the most difficult to quantify. For an experienced chorus master such as myself to be able to sit and listen to other choruses and more particularly the work of other chorus masters work for five weeks was a luxury. Yet to improve the artistic output of a busy chorus such as the OA Chorus this is a necessary luxury. To hear sounds live, to witness a different take on a particular style of music, to hear different vocal colours, to observe phrasing I would never have thought of, to see the pace and structure of a music rehearsal given by a fine chorus master unfold, to be able to sit with chorus singers and see and hear what they see and hear during music and production rehearsals were all invaluable lessons and ones that will stay with me. As I moved around the chorus observed each day I was able to observe the voices around me, listen to a rehearsal from an employee's perspective and was able to understand the importance of clear instructions, well paced rehearsals and the need for genuine positive reinforcement.

New York (NYCO)

Away from the Met it was interesting to meet with Chuck Prestinari, the Acting Chorus Master at NYC Opera and to see a performance of *Candide* there. Even though this chorus is based literally next door to the Met Chorus, there are marked differences between the two ensembles ranging from salaries and work conditions to repertoire and size of chorus.

NYCO is a seasonal professional opera company with a chorus employed on a similar basis to that at San Francisco Opera. They are employed for around eight to nine months of each year, are guaranteed employment from season to season and enjoy full benefits. When I arrived in NYC, NYCO was in its final weeks of their season with the opening of *Candide* marking the beginning of the last show to hit the stage in their season.

As the NYCO openly uses a sound enhancement system in their house, the size of their chorus is much smaller than that of the Met next door, even though both theatres are quite large. This means that a standard repertoire piece like *La Traviata* can be performed with approximately half the number of chorus singers (and thus half the cost) at NYCO. This in turn has a huge effect on the quality of sound that is produced. Individual voices are more likely to be heard, both soft and loud singing are less likely to have the same acoustic quality of the unaided human voice and unless the sound system is positioned absolutely correctly, directional distortions can occur frequently.

Having said this, it was interesting to hear how this sound system works in a theatre for a work such as *Candide*. Opera Australia now performs lighter repertoire such as Gilbert and Sullivan, Sondheim or Lehar every year with sound enhancement far less successful than the one heard at NYCO and I will be more actively involved in the future at finding solutions to this at the Sydney Opera House.

NYCO also uses their chorus for many roles and covers in addition to their chorus duties and it was beneficial to discuss with Chuck how these are offered to a chorus singer and who makes the artistic decision. As in Australia, the chorus here is paid extra for these added responsibilities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This opportunity to travel and observe other opera choruses at work enabled me to conclude several things. Some of these conclusions are:

- It is vital for individuals such as myself to travel and interact with like colleagues around the world on a regular basis. This not only informs and reinforces what is being done well in Australia, but also opens up the mind as to the potential of possibilities.
- The importance of change in the workplace. Whilst there is never a need to reinvent the wheel, it is vital to invigorate the workplace with subtle musical and administrative innovation on a regular basis. As a result of this trip scheduling and rehearsal changes will take place at Opera Australia
- As a result of much discussion and observation during this trip a written procedural policy facilitating the end of a chorus singer's career will be in place within the next 12 months at Opera Australia. This will be the first time in the history of OA that this will be formalised and will be done in consultation with the chorus and their union.
- The importance of easy working relationships between chorus, chorus master and management. Musical excellence is sometimes incredibly easy to obtain (particularly if personnel choices are wise ones), but maintaining an easy, positive and productive work environment can sometimes be more difficult with a tight knit artistic group. Communications between chorus manager and chorus master and also chorus manager and chorus members is vital for the smooth operational workings of a chorus. As a result of this trip many new daily and long term implementations will be made at OA.
- The importance of musical integrity at all times. As a member of a chorus, a singer can feel slightly anonymous or less of an individual and more as part of a group. By keeping the musical standards incredibly high, the individual singer becomes not only more aware of their input in the work of the ensemble but also more responsible for their work and therefore responsible for positive outcomes.
- To establish ongoing relationships with the choruses, chorus masters and chorus administrators visited on this trip and possibly organise both chorus and chorus master exchanges in the future.

Appendix

As previously mentioned, once this project was organised it became obvious that it would be a waste not to continue on to European opera houses. This after the time spent in NYC I traveled onto Barcelona, Berlin, St Petersburg and then briefly to Hong Kong to observe the following

Barcelona: to observe rehearsals of a new Peter Mussbach production of *Death in Venice* conducted by Sebastian Weigle at the Liceu and to meet with the chorus master Jose Luis Basso.

Berlin: to see a performance of the huge chorus opera *Lohengrin* at the Deutsche Oper and to meet with the relatively newly appointed chorus master William Spaulding.

St Petersburg: to attend a performance of Macbeth and to meet with the chorus administration there.

Hong Kong: to attend rehearsals and a performance of Walton's *Henry V*. As I often freelance as chorus master for Cantillation and SSO in Sydney, it was a wonderful opportunity to observe another orchestra and chorus at work in the concert repertoire.