

# **THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA**

**Report by: Tobias G. R. Foskett – Churchill Fellow  
2002/2**

**The Mr and Mrs Gerald Frank New Churchill  
Fellowship to observe and assist experts in the field of  
conducting in major European Opera Houses.**

I understand that the Churchill Trust may publish this report, either in hard copy or on the internet or both, and consent to such a publication.

I indemnify the Churchill Trust against any loss, cost or damages it may suffer arising out of any claim or proceedings made against the Trust in respect or arising out of the publication of any report submitted to the Trust and which the Trust place on a website for access over the internet.

I also warrant that my final report is original and does not infringe the copyright of any person, or contain anything which is, or the incorporation of which into the final report is, actionable for defamation, a breach of any privacy law or obligation, breach or confidence, contempt of court, passing-off or contravention of any private right or of any law.

Signed

Dated

## **Contents**

Introduction	3
Executive Summary	3
Programme	3
Individuals	
Institutions	
Experiences	
Major lessons and Conclusions	4
Appendix I	11

## **Introduction**

My fellowship has consisted primarily with observing and assisting, as an assistant conductor, leader conductors in the European opera scene. It is impossible to construct a career as a conductor of classical art music without experiencing the European scene. A trip like the one I have recently completed, with the generous support of the Churchill Trust, is fundamental to the development of a conductor. The culture of classical music was originally an exclusively European one, and it's main artists and organizations still centre around this Central European scene. Nowhere else in the world gives the opportunity to work with so many world-class performers, orchestras and opera houses. The following observations, both technical for conductors and general in the running of an opera house I have found pertinent in comparison to my experiences in Australia.

## **Executive Summary**

Tobias G. R. Foskett  
1 Booroondara Street  
Reid Act 2612, Australia  
Telephone: (02) 62479275, 0402056654

Management:  
Arts Management Pty Ltd  
Lvl 2 / 420 Elizabeth Street  
Surry Hills 2010 Australia  
Telephone: (02) 93102466

## **Programme**

To observe and assist experts in the field of conducting in major European Opera Houses.

## **Interesting Individuals:**

Sebastian Weigle, Conductor Staatsoper Berlin  
Daniel Barenboim, Musical Director Staatsoper Berlin  
Simone Young, Conductor Staatsoper Berlin, Wiener Staatsoper  
Julia Jones, Conductor Staatsoper Berlin  
Karen Kamensek, Conductor Komische Oper Berlin, Oper Frankfurt

## **Institutions:**

Berlin Staatsoper  
Wiener Staatsoper  
Komische Oper Berlin  
Deutsche Oper Berlin  
Oper Frankfurt  
Stuttgart Philharmonic

## **Highlight Experiences:**

Conducting rehearsals of Traviata in the Oper Frankfurt including stage rehearsals. Observing rehearsals with Daniel Barenboim, the Berlin Philharmonic and Berlin Staatsoper.

Assisting Simone Young with a production of Schubert's Lazarus with the Stuttgart Philharmonic.

Assisting Simone Young with a production of Wagner's Fliegender Holländer with the Berlin Staatsoper.

## **Major lessons and Conclusions**

### **Rehearsal Structures**

Differences that have appeared in the basic structure of rehearsals in Europe versus the norms I have come to recognise in Australia. In Australia, repertoire operas, that is productions which are performed regularly (every three or four seasons), are rehearsed usually with a minimum of four weeks production time, two orchestral readings (orchestra alone rehearsals) two piano dress rehearsals (rehearsals in the theatre with costume but no orchestra), two stage orchestral rehearsals (rehearsals in the theatre with orchestra) and a general rehearsal (dress rehearsal). The season of this production will usually now run for between 7 and 20 performances. This is not the case in larger European houses. Repertoire productions may only be performed for two or three weeks giving only four performances and with a rehearsal period of minimal duration. A good, but extreme, example was a production of Die Frau Ohne Schatten by Richard Strauss I observed in the Wien Staatsoper (Vienna State Opera). Amazingly for a work of this complexity and length the rehearsals consisted of a three-hour studio call with only major principals and a piano. This short rehearsal was split between production and music and done with minimal props and costume (a box as a wall and a pair of shoes). There were no stage rehearsals and no orchestral rehearsals. The evening after the rehearsal was opening night. The conductor enters the pit, shakes hand with leader of the orchestra (as this is probably the first time he or she has met them), and off we go with one of Strauss' more complex scores.

How is this possible? Why do we not do it in Australia? Is it better? The first question can be answered based on the depth of quality that is available in Europe. In order to put this production together there will be high quality singers who know the piece, worked in the production last year, and are just over the border in Germany, Italy etc. The task of flying these singers together is not insurmountable and seems to basically involve good diary planning. It is very common for all the singers to fly in from four different countries perform that night and then be performing again tomorrow night in Rome, Paris or Berlin. This in turn answers the second question. Not denying the talent of singing that is being fostered in Australia, we are a small nation in population by European standards.

The depth of talent doesn't exist, the amount of work for young singers, and therefore the opportunity to develop a broader base of talent doesn't exist. It is also simply not possible to fly someone over from France or Germany for a performance or pair of performances. We simply don't have as full a supermarket shelf to shop from. When singers are brought from Europe the distances involved mean they must be engaged for lengthy periods of time as will miss weeks of performances at home.

The question regarding whether this is a better situation is more complex. We must not forget that the orchestra that was used in this example was the Vienna Philharmonic and if an orchestra can play this repertoire without rehearsal, I believe this is one of the ones that can. This is repertoire the orchestra has been playing regularly since Strauss wrote it in 1910. I'm certainly not saying that we are simply struggling along with longer rehearsals because we can't get the talent or resources. I believe it is an artistic decision and artistic problems are created by these short periods of rehearsal. A more "production line" feel exists, the opportunity to concentrate concertededly on a piece, to find new artistic avenues or ideas, is not always there. Although the production was originally fully rehearsed as a new production, that may have been three or four or even more seasons ago. The director's original concept can become lost or clouded without a solid redefinition in rehearsals. There can also be more obvious musical problems arising. To continue the Vienna example: Sitting with the conductor during the first interval of the first performance, she said to me she believed the Oboe player hadn't played this before. In the second interval she was definite. Then came a knock on the door, it opened a crack and the oboe player stuck his head round the corner: "Entschuldigen Sie bitte, aber ich habe dieses Stück noch nie gespielt. Könnten Sie mir ein bißchen helfen?" (Excuse me but I haven't ever played this piece before. Can you help me a little?). This, she said was not uncommon and she assisted him by giving his cues priority. There is evidence that the lack of rehearsal does compromise the orchestral playing. There is no question that orchestral ensemble and orchestra and stage ensemble would only improve with more rehearsal. Stage elements, particularly technical elements, also suffer, as the stage technicians have no opportunity to rehearse with the singers and music. Indeed in many of my experiences in Europe I have noticed problems on the technical side of productions (poor changing of sets etc.) and realised how well rehearsed and smoothly technical aspects in Australia function. Not to be too negative though, from financial and audience point of view one benefits from this European system due to a wider variety of operas performed per season. Less rehearsal means less money spent and therefore more to invest in new productions. New productions, like in Australia, are fully rehearsed including stage orchestral rehearsals and orchestral readings. Perhaps a case of Swings and Roundabouts.

One last question that should be addressed is that of rostering within the orchestra. A busy opera house orchestra will be performing six times or more a week and days will be filled with rehearsals for new productions or purely orchestral concerts. This makes rostering within the orchestra a necessity. Several experiences have demonstrated to me that it is not always done efficiently. A production in Oper Frankfurt, where I worked as Assistant Conductor, we were lucky enough to receive an orchestral rehearsal but, due to orchestral rostering the same orchestra we rehearsed that day was not exactly the same orchestra that performed the opening night the next. Orchestra members need to be

assigned to a production rather than working on three or four and only doing half of the rehearsals and performances from each. This could be easily achieved through efficient scheduling and rostering.

## **Productions**

My travels in Europe and experiences of performances in Berlin, Frankfurt, Vienna and Stuttgart have also called to my attention an interesting trend in production design and concept. With the more traditional repertoire, the Verdi, Puccini, Wagner and Mozart, there is a definite leaning towards an avant garde style. Houses like the Komische Oper in Berlin concentrate mainly on this style. Presenting works that may well be simultaneously playing in another house in the same city but with a new twist, thus filling a market niche. Simple minimalist sets and modern costumes are common. A production of Handel's Tamerlano performed at the Komische Oper in Berlin consisted of black sets, singers in trench coats and stylised choreography. The recent new production of Nos (the nose) by Schostakowich, performed at the Berlin Staatsoper (state opera), conducted by Kent Nagano and directed by Peter Mussbach had the orchestra as part of the set, dressed in white jump suits and wearing gold helmets. The action moved through the orchestra as well as using the stage behind. One of the main characters appeared first in drag and then as Osama Bin Laden (still sporting the high heels). This suits this particularly composition, the plot of a man losing his nose in the first scene and spending the next hour and half looking for it is abstract to begin with. However, does this style suit a more traditional Verdi or Puccini? To site another example I observed a production of Verdi's Traviata performed again at the Berlin Staatsoper, conducted by Daniel Barenboim and also directed by Peter Mussbach. Violetta spent the entire duration of the opera on stage in a white fluorescent dress. She communicated in a limited detached way with other characters on the stage and during the opening party scene most of the chorus and other principals sang from off stage and only occasionally floated through. We viewed this scene through a huge car windscreen with a windscreen wiper that regularly came across the whole stage. For an audience member like myself, who knows the opera well, I enjoyed the concept, the feeling that Violetta was imagining or reliving most of the action. I was accompanied though by a Traviata virgin and despite my attempts to fill gaps the production made the basic story difficult to grasp. Perhaps the Germans are so familiar with their operas that they crave these interesting concepts and directors who are searching for other ideas that may be hidden between the lines of the libretto.

## **Support and Cultural Ownership**

An interesting fact to observe in Germany is the sheer number of Opera Houses that operate, not just as half a year concerns or three productions but full time opera companies. The number is around 80. Compare that with Australia's total of one. Obviously there is a population difference here, 20 to 80 million but the difference is still disproportionate. Why then is this the case? Firstly the answer is Government funding. Australia's full time opera company Opera Australia receives less government funding

then almost every other house of an international standard. Where as, in Germany, the funding is to a level that even a small town of 200,000 people can support a full time opera company. If a city like Canberra was in Germany it would have a full time opera company a separate full time orchestra and maybe even a Volksoper (peoples opera) performing lighter operettas. As it stands Canberra supports a part time symphony orchestra. It is not just the fault of government funding. People in Germany go to the opera. I have met very few people here, including young people (one will often see a cue of young people waiting to pick up cheap tickets half an hour before the show begins) who haven't been to the opera at some time in their life and would support the government subsidy. In short I feel that people have ownership of the culture here. Italy and Germany bare the responsibility, largely, for the development of opera. We don't have this connection and ownership of the art form in Australia and so it is seen as elite, something that a certain class of society attend, the educated, the rich, so we go to the football. There has to be a balance, and European countries seem to be closer to it. They are still crazy over sport, soccer as an obvious example, but have room for opera, in fact a huge variety of Kunst (art).

I see so many Australian musicians in Germany and I feel some of this is explained by the question of support.

### **Conducting Styles, Techniques**

An interesting phenomenon observed here is the orchestral delay. An Orchestra in Australia will respond almost instantly to a conductor's down beat. Disregarding the differences between strings, which generally take a small amount of time to respond due to the physics of the instruments, and percussion instruments, which respond instantly, German orchestras will play late. It is fascinating to watch a conductor placing a fortissimo downbeat and waiting for the sound to arrive. Delays change based on instrumentation, dynamics and articulation. For example, a piano, tenuto string chord will sound later as a forte sforzando brass chord. Why this is is a little perplexing. It gives the orchestra extra time to respond to the subtleties that the conductor indicates but the affect on ensemble can be obviously detrimental. Overcoming these detrimental effects requires a strong internal, independent orchestral ensemble. Certainly orchestral ensembles in Germany seem more independent, regardless of the quality of who is standing in front of them; a german orchestra will always give a tight performance. The hierarchy of orchestral leadership is employed to the full (concertmaster, leaders of each string section, woodwind and brass). A German orchestra can play without a conductor and even with a bad conductor trying to interfere (and I have heard leaders of the section discussing plans to ignore the conductor and just make it work themselves). That is not to remove the importance of the conductor to unify the musical ideas and indeed this is my concept of conducting, less musical traffic cop and more a unifier of musical concepts, guiding 80 individual ideas of how a piece should be performed in to a unified performance. An orchestra should be able to play as an ensemble without help. Delayed playing though can create some problems based on styles and repertoire. Puccini has a huge variation in tempo, even within one bar, and an orchestra that plays with a

long delay can make this not functional. Controlling minimal tempo changes that last for only two or three beats is difficult. It therefore seems that exercising ones musical will over an orchestra that employs these habits will be harder.

I'd like to move now into a little more detail of the variety of conducting techniques I have observed. As a young conductor, one spends a lot of time observing and assisting and the opportunity to do this in houses of an A standard\* is invaluable. One picks up things that one would use and also often observes techniques and rehearsal attitudes that one may well avoided. One of the specific areas that have interested me on this trip is the conflict (or attempted marriage) between musicality and clarity. Is the conductor's task to show the beat and be responsible for the orchestral ensemble, or to shape the whole musical idea? As I have moved from the world of amateur orchestras and choirs with which I worked with for many years and still do enjoy working with, my opinion has also shifted. As mentioned before a good orchestra is responsible, and capable, of maintaining it's own eternal ensemble. Opera is slightly more complicated because of distances and aural problems created by singers climbing all over a stage, but fundamentally my views have been reinforced by my experiences. A good example was a production of *Zauberflöte* I observed at the Staatsoper in Berlin. This is a very regularly performed opera and one I have assisted and seen many times, the challenge to make it sound fresh is therefore a big one. The conductor in this case achieved it by almost totally relinquished control of the ensemble. He would set tempos, obviously, but as Mozart traditionally has little rubato would leave the task of maintaining the tempo with the hierarchy of the orchestra. The left hand was then employed to shape the phrasing and the right hand kept as calm as possible. Often for several bars no apparent beat was present but a long left-hand gesture would produce a perfectly shaped phrase. This concept of minimal beating can also be applied to other (ensemble secure moments) to enhance a real soft playing or even create a tentative sound. Since these observations this is a technique I have employed and explained it to all young groups I have worked with. Not enough young orchestras in Europe or Australia understand how to use their orchestral hierarchy to maintain and control ensemble. Although often a shock for these groups to be confronted with a conductor, who often, will not conduct in the traditional sense, the ensemble will generally improve as players listen more and function better as a unit. When dealing with music that requires more flexibility in tempo, Puccini as a good example, I have observed other techniques often employed. The importance of flexibility between beats while keeping the beats flowing (never stopping) is paramount. In this style of music even pauses should be treated not as stops but as extensions, stretching of the beat. The classic school of this that I've observed belongs to Daniel Barenboim and subsequently to many of his assistants. Without getting too technical, a slow compound meter or triplet rhythm pattern can easily be stretched (slowed down) by emphasising the second triplet in each group, small secondary beats extend the length of each beat. It is visually easy to follow and is the most important technique for creating rubato.

\*(Orchestras and Opera houses in Germany are classified as either A, B or C, this distinguishing funding and as a result the money available to employ the more experienced and famous musicians)

## **Anecdotal Experiences**

The following are small less important observations that I have found interesting.

### **Language**

This trip has really brought home the importance of language. I don't mean in terms of ordering you dinner or even in terms of the language of the specific opera being rehearsed but the necessity for a working knowledge of several languages to facilitate a rehearsal process. As discussed, in the rehearsals procedures section above, it is not usual to have a large range of singers from several countries rehearsing in a single production. As an example, in Oper Frankfurt while working on a production of Traviata by Verdi we had two Italians, three Americans, three Germans, an Australian and a Russian. Some of us had English in common, some had no English but German and some had no German or English and Italian was the only option. In Australia we underestimate the importance of learning a foreign language. It is easy to forget that a large percentage of the European world is bi lingual and as a developing bilingualist it has opened up a whole world of opportunities that were unavailable to me previously. Communicating directly with artists in their language, as a conductor, is an important part of the rehearsal process, it develops trust and a better understanding. The opportunity to use a language in its native country is also invaluable, quickly increasing vocabulary and comprehension skills.

### **The Three Opera Houses**

Berlin, a city where I have spent a large part of my trip is fascinating on many levels. As a historical city very few other places have had so central a role in the twentieth century. If anything good could be said to have resulted from some of this, and particularly the period of physical division the city went through as a result of actions by the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (East Germany), it was the creation of the Deutsche Oper. Unter den Linden and the therefore the Staatsoper, Berlin's original opera house founded by Frederick the Great and built in 1743, fell on the eastern side. Not to be outdone the western half of the city threw together an opera house in 1961 called the Deutsche Oper. Many cities in Germany have two opera house, a more serious Staatsoper (state opera) and a Volksoper (people's opera, performing lighter operas and German musicals). Berlin also has it's Volksoper, the Komische Oper. Weather the city is capable of supporting three A class opera houses, created only through acts of political history, is unclear. There are many financial problems in Berlin and the funding of the arts is under scrutiny (sounds familiar) and talk of the Staatsoper and Deutsche Oper at least financially combining is common. As long as artistic independence is maintained this seems a viable solution.

## **Quality**

A few comments on the quality of orchestral playing I have experienced here. I have often been surprised by the difference in quality of what would normally be rated as A houses. It is true here, as it is in Australia, there is a huge range in the ability of professional orchestras. One thing that has been particularly impressive though is the standard of string playing. I have never heard strings playing to the level that I observed with Vienna (although this is probably not to surprising). Seeing the back desk of the seconds violins applying as much bow as the first, the double basses playing a waltz with as much musical feel as their favorite solo repertoire, and creating an overall deep and often incredibly quite sound. This quality is historic, with the Vienna philharmonic most of the instruments are owned by the orchestra and are over 200 years old and the history of string playing, the depth of teaching talent and knowledge, in incomparable with anywhere in the world. Players in the orchestra are often the teachers of the new members. We in Australia simple can't compete with this, but have the ability to emulate it in some respect. It is always important to broaden ones horizons of what is possible, so, as a conductor, I know what I can realistically demand, or aim to drive a group towards.

## Appendix I

### Performances Observed/Assisted

<b>Composer</b>	<b>Composition</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Conductor</b>
Benjamin Britten	Peter Grimes	Oper Frankfurt	Sian Edwards
Mozart	Piano Concerto in D minor	Berlin Philharmonic	Daniel Barenboim Soloist/Conductor
Ravel	Bolero	Berlin Philharmonic	Daniel Barenboim
Mozart	Zauberflöte	Berlin Staatsoper	Sebastian Weigle
Mozart	Zauberflöte	Deutsche Oper Berlin	Christoph Ulrich Meier
Verdi	Traviata	Berlin Staatsoper	Daniel Barenboim
Verdi	Traviata	Oper Frankfurt	Karen Kamensek
Schubert	Lazarus	Stuttgart Philharmonic	Simone Young
R. Strauss	Die Frau ohne Schatten	Wiener Staatsoper	Simone Young
Carl Zeller	Der Vogelhändler	Komische Oper Berlin	Karen Kamensek
Schostakowich	Nos	Berlin Staatsoper	Kent Nagano
Gounod	Romeo and Juliet	Oper Frankfurt	Karen Kamensek
R. Strauss	Der Rosenkavalier	Berlin Staatsoper	Sebastian Weigle
Brahms	Piano Concertos	Berlin Staatsoper	Daniel Barenboim Soloist Zubin Mehta Conductor
Wagner	Fliegender Holländer	Berlin Staatsoper	Simone Young
Puccini	Tosca	Berlin Staatsoper	Simone Young
Handel	Tamerlano	Komische Oper Berlin	Johannes Vogel
Mozart	Marriage of Figaro	Berlin Staatsoper	Julia Jones