Rian Evans on Music Theatre

Dewi Savage reviews the
Welsh National Opera's new
Eugene Onegin

Antony Pickthall on
‘Giving Voice’
and the Centre for
Performance Research

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Music theatre
A radical aesthetic rather than a form
Rian Evans

As the countdown to the opening of the Wales Millennium Centre gathers pace, Rian Evans laments the lack of a suitable space for the performance of music theatre, and suggests how this difficulty might be overcome so that one of Wales’s most progressive theatre forms can be enjoyed and celebrated by a wider audience.

The advent of the Wales Millennium Centre will change our perspective on many aspects of what Richard Eyre has termed lyric theatre, so it is perhaps timely to look at the challenge this presents for music theatre in particular. But before considering this challenge, it might be as well to try to pin down the genre. Internet entries, however, only underline the difficulty of doing so with any precision. Typing ‘music theatre’ into a search engine quickly produces Music Theatre International, the agency which represents Miss Saigon, Les Misérables and all of Stephen Sondheim. It’s certain that the likes of these will come to the Millennium Centre, but it’s not what the purists mean by music theatre. It’s significant that, from the outset, the Wales Millennium Centre has had to accommodate two sets of requirements and figures: one set identified by the letters WNO and the other by CM, Cameron Mackintosh. It’s also significant that the establishment of a biennial International Festival of Musical Theatre intended to alternate with the Singer of the World competition was an early acknowledgement of the fact that the Wales Millennium Centre would be as much a musical house as an opera house.

So back to the search engine. Add Wales to music theatre in the subject box and it obligingly comes up with Music Theatre Wales, the Cardiff-based company whose work is regarded as the finest in Britain and among the very finest anywhere. The company took its cue from the progressive ideals of the English Opera Group (later the English Music Theatre Company) originally formed by Benjamin Britten at Aldeburgh. However, since what Music Theatre Wales stages is primarily contemporary chamber opera, our original question immediately poses itself once again.

Perhaps the reality is that music theatre is a radical aesthetic rather than a form. It has its roots in the experimental work of the 1960s which attempted to shed the perceived excesses of opera. Its defining characteristic is a greater emphasis on the dramatic and the visual rather than on simply musical elements. That emphasis ought, in theory, only to be further enhanced in today’s climate with the new freedom offered by a greater naturalism on the one hand and by up-to-the-minute technology on the other. In recent years, the influence of the music theatre aesthetic on mainstream opera has been noticeable, and Welsh National Opera’s often stated commitment to a heightened dramatic approach is a reflection of the fact that, even in very traditional opera, it’s no longer sufficient for singers simply to stand and deliver their arias. We can assume that the Millennium Centre, with its state-of-the-art facilities, will permit WNO to embrace this commitment with a renewed vigour, but for Music Theatre Wales the situation is different. There’s no place for them in the new set-up, where the main auditorium is too big and the Centre’s studio too small. Performances can be programmed in the latter space, but it has no pit for musicians, and will not suit the company’s present style of work. Given that Music Theatre Wales enjoys associate status at the Royal Opera House, where they perform in Covent Garden’s Linbury Studio, it is both baffling
and ironic that Wales’s ‘other’ flagship company will not be at the WMC, but it is typical of Music Theatre Wales’s inventive approach that they are determined to turn things round and make the new landscape work in the company’s favour.

‘It has always been a frustration that the one place we’ve had trouble getting the right space to perform is Cardiff, our home city,’ says Artistic Director Michael McCarthy. ‘And, yes, in some ways, it’s even more ironic that we won’t fit anywhere into the Millennium scheme. But we realised that our biggest successes of late had been in the Cheltenham and Buxton Festivals playing in Matcham-designed theatres, where our work fits and sits well. So it seemed logical to think about Cardiff’s New Theatre (also Matcham), and when we performed our last show, Param Vir’s Ion, we had a very positive experience there. So as WNO moves out of the New into the Centre, there’s a logic about our moving into the New and inviting audiences to look at that space afresh.’

For McCarthy and MTW’s fellow founder, Music Director Michael Rafferty, it was always a very deliberate choice to eschew large-scale work and, as McCarthy points out, not for nothing is the company slogan ‘Intimate opera with a big kick’. But while it was MTW’s brilliant production of Harrison Birtwistle’s Punch and Judy – with all its raw power and immediacy itself a milestone in the history of music theatre – which established the company’s reputation beyond doubt, McCarthy now wants that characteristically powerful style and energy to be channelled into new pieces, rather than contemporary classics.

‘Our work is not about the overwhelming, indulgent spectacle that is opera, but about operating on a different level of communication with the public, requiring a different kind of participation which is more like theatre. We invite the audience to be part of the experience from the inside, so that it becomes a process of gradual engagement rather than telling them how to feel. One of our fundamentals
is that we regard the whole score as our text, not just the words of the libretto, and this is where the relationships we develop with the composers are crucial.

McCarthy and Rafferty’s optimism is further supported by the news that Music Theatre Wales will be getting funding from the Jerwood Charitable Foundation worth £60,000 over the next two years. This will help finance the two current projects, Nigel Osborne’s *The Piano Tuner* and Lynne Plowman’s *House of the Gods*, and will also allow the company to appoint two associate composers, reinforcing Music Theatre Wales’s commitment to new work.

‘This kind of music needs performers of an incredibly high standard, and it’s gratifying that we have so many gifted and versatile Welsh singers,’ says McCarthy. ‘There is sometimes an implication that music theatre is less demanding a genre than opera but, on the contrary, it is more demanding and requires real virtuosity vocally as well as dramatic flair. For me, it has been particularly instructive to be party to discussions currently underway in Norway, where a new national opera house is also moving towards completion. That building will also house a smaller space where music theatre and chamber opera will be staged, and it’s interesting that the Norwegians are considering opening the smaller space first in order to spotlight the more progressive form and to give it a chance to establish itself before staging the more traditional work in the main auditorium.’

Since it is the intensity of the experience that makes music theatre such a forceful medium, it may be that, in terms of audience response, a parallel should be with contemporary cinema rather than conventional opera. Judging from the successes of the past couple of years, there certainly appears to be a growing appetite for new opera in England. Welsh bass Gwynne Howell sang in Thomas Adès’s opera *The Tempest*, performed recently at Covent Garden to popular and critical acclaim, and he would like to think that there will be more new works produced in the Millennium Centre. Howell has never had any qualms about tackling new music, but he believes its power to communicate is intricately bound up with the way that the human voice is used. ‘I’m less concerned with whether a piece is thought of as music theatre or modern opera. Whatever the message or whatever the music, a composer still needs to write for a voice in a way that it can still sing and I believe that as long as the music is singable, that is to say manageable by singers, then the whole business of connecting with an audience can produce powerful stuff. The emotion is there, the drama is there and it’s the voice which expresses it. In Wales the power of the voice is something we’ve always recognised, and it would be great to think that composers were going to be given the opportunity to create music that comes out of such a strong tradition.’

The Welsh composer John Metcalf is not content to accept the parameters of chamber opera or music theatre. He has a profound commitment to changing the whole audience experience in order to make it less formalised and less hierarchical, and to push back the boundaries between different forms. To that end, his piece *Kafka’s Chimp*, first produced by the Banff Arts Centre in Canada, dispenses with a conductor – Metcalf will not license the piece unless this condition is met – and also requires musicians to be characters in the performance alongside the singers and dancers. His aim is to achieve the greatest possible interaction between music, dance, lights and pictures.
Kafka’s Chimp is about the natural order of things and the polarisation of instinct and intellect in society today, and it was inspired by Franz Kafka’s short story ‘A Report to the Academy’. A chimpanzee, captured on Africa’s Gold Coast but now under the care of the Academy’s director, discovers that in order to survive in the metropolis he must become a human. But as the chimp undergoes his metamorphosis, the director himself is also gradually transforming, and becomes a chimp. This being Kafka, there is a point when the audience looks at them both and can’t tell which is which. The philosophical, ethical and moral concerns of the piece have important implications, but so too do the work’s practical aspects. One of its most successful productions (rapturously received across the Atlantic and in Sweden, but yet to be staged in Metcal’s native Wales) took place in Pittsburgh Zoo. Kafka’s Chimp, simply because it happens not to require a pit, serves to illustrate the fact that the absence of ‘proper’ facilities in the Millennium Centre’s studio need not spell a negative or defeatist approach. It could instead be the breeding ground for exciting experiments by composers who go beyond the stereotypical patterns which have tended to characterise opera and music theatre to date.

The balance which music theatre seeks to achieve is arguably very close to the original aims of the Florentines and Venetians who established opera in the early seventeenth century – Claudio Monteverdi certainly put musicians and singers together on stage in some of his pioneering work. The principle which remains is that the smaller scale and the closer relationship of performers with the audience permits an immediacy which creates an altogether more stimulating, thought-provoking and affecting experience than grander, bigger opera. In the ’80s and the early part of the ’90s, Wales appeared to be establishing itself as a hotbed for the development of new work. Welsh companies, Brith Gof among them, were staging productions which often aspired – whether consciously or unconsciously – to the condition of music theatre. This spate of imaginative work unquestionably contributed to the sense of lively engagement with form and content which went beyond the boundaries of conventional theatre, but the funding changes of the ’90s deliberately edged out the companies who engaged in experiment. The hope was that the advent of the new Welsh Assembly would provide the impetus for change, and there is now an urgent need for the kind of funding that permits more cutting edge work to be honed again in a new millennium, in the new Millennium Centre and in satellite spaces. The scope ought to be infinite.

Pierre Boulez famously called music theatre ‘opera for the poor’, a form which neither requires nor aspires to the same extravagant trappings as grand opera.
Remembering that plans for the predecessor to the Wales Millennium Centre were scuppered in part thanks to preconceptions about the elitist nature of opera, Boulez’ definition again offers food for thought. Through the centuries, Wales has, without question, been impoverished in the matter of theatre and drama, and the country has never been a nation of dramatists. But Wales is unusual in having equally old musical and literary traditions and, since music and words are the very fundamentals on which music theatre depends, there is a logic which suggests that more radical approaches combining both disciplines could produce music theatre emblematic of a new era. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that in the musico/dramatic Anterliwt of Twm o’r Nant there is quite a useful precedent to adopt and adapt in the twenty-first century.

In her native Australia, Judith Isherwood, Chief Executive of the Wales Millennium Centre, developed collaborations which aimed at a cross-fertilisation of ideas, so that links were made with theatre and music organisations which did not necessarily perform their shows on the main stages of the Sydney Opera House, but strutted their stuff in new spaces across the city. Given the basis on which the Millennium Centre was conceived – as a working arts centre which could make links with the whole of Wales and not just with an elitist crachach; given the wealth of experience that still exists in Wales even if it is presently unexploited; and given the kind of radical international work with which Wales has such strong connections – Banff Arts Centre, MTW’s European partners and Aberystwyth’s ‘Giving Voice’ Festival are just a few examples – the outlook could be excellent. Is the time not ripe then for a new spirit of adventure in music theatre which could spell meaningful and life-enhancing experiences for the Welsh audience?

The WNO Russian Series will bring together seven operas by four great Russian composers over the next six years. The Russian Series marks a new direction of artistic and musical development for the Company, which says that ‘in the Wales Millennium Centre we will have the physical space and technical capacity ideal for these large-scale operas’. The series, which will include new productions of Mazeppa by Tchaikovsky (Summer 2006) and Khovanshchina by Mussorgsky (Spring 2007) was launched at the New Theatre in February with Tchaikovsky’s Eugene Onegin, Tugan Sokhiev’s first new production as WNO’s Music Director.

The Welsh National Opera will present a veritable Russian operatic cycle over the next few years. Highly appropriate, you may say, with the strikingly young new Russian musical director Tugan Sokhiev at the helm. Such a repertoire has been comparatively rare in the last two decades and will include one utter rarity, Tchaikovsky’s Mazeppa, along with a revival of the inspired Richard Jones production of his theatrical masterpiece The Queen of Spades and David Pountney’s fine interpretation of Mussorgsky’s Boris Godunov.

A more frequent visitor to Wales and WNO’s touring circuit has been Tchaikovsky’s Eugene Onegin, James Macdonald’s new production being the third in just over twenty years. Andrei Serban’s outstanding conception in the ’80s was replaced by a clear but problematic
version by Howard Davies in the ’90s. This latest incarnation shares both the latter’s clarity and, for different reasons, its problems.

If Queen of Spades is the zenith of the composer’s operatic oeuvre, it is equally no wonder that the accessibly ageless Onegin is a more enduring popular success, encapsulating as it does both the breathtaking, lilting beauty of his ballet music and the darker-veined beauty of the often anguished symphonies.

Byronically Romantic in its anti-Romanticism and its emotionally brittle and bitter conclusion, and one of the most intensely lyrical of all music dramas, Onegin was defined by Tchaikovsky himself as not an ‘opera’ but ‘lyric scenes in three acts’, partly writing the libretto from Pushkin’s verse novel himself.

Eugene Onegin depicts Tatyanas thwarted love for Onegin and its eventual reversal, and the production flows elegantly and poignantly, like a river. Or it should. And that is the fundamental problem with Macdonald’s production. Lengthened by an always extraneous second interval, longish scene-changes – two in the first act, one each in the other two – make it positively cumbersome.

Of course, this used to be the way, certainly at Covent Garden. In fact, there were celebrated Zeffirelli productions in which changes of entire sets, not merely scenes, were interminable. Eventually objections to such longeurs grew until they were outlawed. Zeffirelli, though, was always a film-maker ‘in waiting’ and subsequently a film-maker, and his settings were stunning. Now, theatrically, he is as concise as Peter Brook. At the WNO, this changing set hardly justified a resurrection of such antiquated ritual, although the costumes, designed by Tobias Hoheisel, were superbly evocative.

The depiction of Onegin as initially an icily Ibsenian character is good, although I am not convinced that Tatyanas would have fallen for quite such a cold fish. Ibsen’s Brand after all, has, as the name implies, palpable fire. In his sister Martha’s recent film of Pushkin’s Onegin, Ralph Fiennes, himself a consummate Brand, has extraordinary fire.

Vladimir Moroz, hampered perhaps by the sepulchral mien imposed upon him by the production, sang strongly but somehow drily and ultimately soullessly, leaving one eager for that sexy, prematurely cold world-weary cynicism that Thomas Allen was able to convey so well in his day. Even when he is finally desperate for Tatyanas – what a gift of a scenario – he remained unmoving.

Of all the changes, an insistence on a 15-minute resetting for the final scene made life unnecessarily difficult for Moroz and Amanda Roocroft’s Tatyanas. Roocroft, always a charismatic performer, convincingly portrayed a young girl’s fresh-faced and, in this work, rapid progression from lovelorn rejection to making her own unshakeable decisions, enhanced and complemented by Hoheisel’s beautiful costumes. If Die Zauberfloete is above all Pamina’s show, then Onegin is certainly Tatyanas, and Roocroft was affecting, particularly in the pivotal ‘Letter Scene’. However, a ringing, glowing brightness of voice somewhat eluded her.
As Olga, the very different and less morose sister, Ekaterina Semenchuk – a very satisfying Russian import – was excellent. Marius Brenciu, however, as her doomed fiancé Lensky, already damned by a ludicrous wig and moustache, was unremarkable.

However, amidst the scene-changing, there was nevertheless some effortless scene-stealing. By far the best singing of the night was by Brindley Sherratt as Prince Gremin. Onegin’s cousin and friend – and, to his chagrin, Tatyana’s new and much older husband – Gremin only appears briefly in the last act, but Sherratt’s sonorous bass shook the house and soothed it and, my word, did it respond.

WNO stalwart Suzanne Murphy and multi-talented regular Linda Ormiston acted nicely as, respectively, Madame Larina and Filipyevna, and the redoubtable chorus sang and danced well to the inventive choreography of Stuart Hopps.
A stronger show would have better graced a season which sustains revivals of WNO’s oldest extant production and one of its greatest, Hertz’s Madama Butterfly, in addition to Richard Jones’s quirkily brilliant and touching Hansel and Gretel. Still, the orchestra played wonderfully and – this is the important point – responsively to Tugan Sokhiev’s baton, and that bodes well for the future of Russian and, hopefully, other opera in Wales.

Dewi Savage is a writer, performer and occasional reviewer for Opera Now, The Western Mail and Cambria.

During 2004/5 the resiliently independent Centre for Performance Research (CPR) is marking a double anniversary: 30 years of work (as both Cardiff Laboratory Theatre Company and CPR) and 10 years since it relocated to Aberystwyth. What started out from a desire to train company members in theatre, dance and performance that nobody else was bringing to the UK has now evolved into the CPR today, led by Artistic Director Richard Gough and Executive Producer Judie Christie.

The work of CPR has influenced the performance landscape not just in Wales but arguably across the world. Actors, directors, writers, singers, dancers and academics have attended workshops, conferences and performances in Cardiff, Aberystwyth and throughout Wales – taking their experiences back to Africa, Asia, Australia, the USA and the far-flung reaches of Europe. They have visited barns, caves, beaches, forests, fields, quarries, chapels and occasionally even theatres in pursuit of outstanding performance practice from around the world. CPR has taken its audience and participants on an exhilarating performance journey: from Chinese Opera to Enrique Vargas’ Labyrinth project, from Jerzy Grotowski’s ‘Laboratorium’ to Meredith Monk’s Sound House. At the heart of this work has been the desire to seek out training to inspire quality, invigorating work.
A major part of this work has been the development of a deeper understanding of the role of the voice in performance. The CPR’s ‘voice in performance’ projects date back to the original formation of CPR – Cardiff Laboratory Theatre (Cardiff Lab), which was established as early as 1980 in order to create intensive in-service training opportunities, initially for the company members, later offering places to other performers in Wales and the UK. As a freelance voice associate with CPR since 1981, Joan Mills has organised substantial gatherings of influential voice practitioners. Initially, these included voice workshops with: traditional singer Frankie Armstrong; jazz and improvisation singer Maggie Nichols; Zygmunt Molik of Grotowski’s world-famous theatre laboratory in Poland; and Enrique Pardo from Peru – who, influenced by the Roy Hart Theatre, specialised in the voice and the psyche.

The great Polish director Jerzy Grotowski’s Wrocław Laboratorium Theatre Group were so impressed by Cardiff Lab’s genuine interest and understanding of physically based voice investigations, that in 1982 they came to teach intensive voice workshops in Cardiff. This was the first time they had visited Britain for 13 years, and participants came from all over the UK. In the years that followed, voice work included the first visit and UK tour of a 60-strong Beijing Opera company, who led workshops and put on performances, followed later by the Shanghai Kunju Opera, who were also on a UK-wide tour with performances, workshops and lecture programmes.

As the newly formed Centre for Performance Research, CPR facilitated the first visit from a remarkable Polish theatre company, Gardzienice Theatre Association, in 1989. Their use of dynamic physical and vocal skills in their memorable show, *Awaakum*, and in the more in-depth context of a workshop, had a huge impact. Performers and directors who attended this workshop have subsequently been at the forefront of a theatre practice that explores voice and movement in new and exciting ways. An off-shoot of Gardzienice, Teatr Piesn Kozla (Theatre of the Song of the Goat) toured Wales as part of the Restless Gravity Festival in October 2000 and Gardzienice have recently been working in Wales again – on a collaboration between their ‘Ancient Orchestra’ and Wales’s own Earthfall Dance Company.

In 1990, the first ‘Giving Voice’ Festival took place, bringing 18 different artists to Cardiff to perform, teach and talk about their work. It was an overwhelming success, and the response showed immediately that CPR had identified an important gap in the provision of performance training and had tapped into a real and deep interest in voice training both for professionals and for the public. The past twenty years have seen a real upsurge of interest in voice-work of all kinds, perhaps because this most natural, personal means of expression and creativity has been so neglected. Joan Mills has been hugely inspired by the work of Kristin Linklater, whose influential books include *Freeing the Natural Voice* and *Freeing Shakespeare’s Voice*. Kristin has been a consistent teacher and contributor since the first ‘Giving Voice’ Festival, supporting it as it developed into a fascinating mix of practical workshops and informed discussion for practitioners and academics. Aberystwyth and Cardiff have hosted the likes of Noah Pikes, Cicely Berry and Tran Qu’ang Hai (who once demonstrated his virtuosity in overtone singing down the phone to CPR Executive Producer, Judie Christie). Virtually every significant voice practitioner of the past 30 years has been a contributor.
Between 30 March and 7 April this year the eighth CPR 'Giving Voice' Festival took place, with a gathering of teachers, performers and participants from around the world, at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff. Teachers included: Enrique Pardo (originally from Chile and now based in France); Jean-René Toussaint and Anne-Marie Blink from Rotterdam's Stemwerk Foundation; Mariana Sadowska – a former performer with the Gardzienice Theatre Association; Judith Shahn from the USA, Tomasz Rodowicz from Poland (one of the founders of Gardzienice Theatre Association); and Åsa Simma from Lapland. This year the festival offered a typically eclectic mix of training, which on this occasion explored the theme of ‘Thinking Voice, Feeling Voice’.

In Aberystwyth in 1996, Joan Mills established a community choir in association with Aberystwyth Arts Centre. This led to CPR’s community participation programme, Local Voices, Worlds of Song – initially a year-long programme of evening classes, weekend workshops, choir commissions and performances funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation. This helped the Heartsong Choir to develop and establish its identity and repertoire through a series of workshops led by Joan Mills and visiting tutors from the UK and abroad. Since 2002, CPR has also organized three annual gatherings for Community Choirs in Wales and the Borders – bringing up to 200 non-professional singers together to learn polyphonic songs from Georgia and Corsica, American Shape Note and Gospel, and ‘singing with confidence’ skills.

In 2003, CPR was awarded funding from the PRS Foundation/Arts Council of Wales New Works fund to commission one of Wales’ leading composers, Karl Jenkins. He has composed a new six-part song cycle, Travels With My Uncle: it will be premiered on 12 December 2004, and will be sung by up to 200 community singers from across Wales.

Now CPR’s publishing division, Black Mountain Press, has published a practical workbook for singers interested in traditional Georgian folk songs. 99 Georgian Songs (£25.00) grew out of a typically close relationship between CPR and an artist, Georgian ethnomusicologist and musician Edisher Garakanidze and his ensemble Mtiebi. It took Joan Mills and CPR six years to produce the work after vowing to publish it when Edisher was tragically killed in 1998. Hugely inspired by the response to his first UK workshops with CPR in Cardiff, he made it his life’s work to collect traditional Georgian folk songs. The production of the book has been a close collaboration between CPR and Edisher’s friends and family. It has been a sometimes frustratingly slow process across phone lines in Georgia, Wales and Australia and through the final years of a repressive Georgian government. As with so much of their work, CPR was inspired by an artist’s vision and has made it real.

For further information about CPR see:
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CPR at Aberystwyth is a joint venture with the University of Wales, Aberystwyth’s Theatre, Film and Television Studies Department, which has enabled it to expand its programme of conferences, workshops, performances, summer schools, festivals and publishing, and help the University establish an MA course on Theatre and the World.

Geraint Talfan Davies, Chair of the Arts Council of Wales, responds to David Adams’s article, ‘So What’s this National Theatre Debate?’ (New Welsh Review 63), in the Letters section of this issue (page 135).
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