

## MID WALES OPERA, THE EARLY YEARS

**Remembered by Keith Darlington and Barbara McGuire MBE, co-founders of Mid Wales Opera**

Although we are celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> year since MWO's first performances in Theatr Hafren in 1989, the seeds of the company were sown in the previous year. Barbara had met singer/solicitor/farmer Alun Jones in a concert and discussed ways of developing local singing talent. With Keith, who was Head of the Birmingham Conservatoire Vocal and Operatic School, a project was formulated for a Summer Opera School for Mid Wales singers and Conservatoire students. So in the summer of 1988 a group of 12 singers met in Meifod for two weekends of concentrated opera coaching, involving music, stagecraft and movement classes, culminating in a piano-accompanied performance of operatic scenes in the newly built Meifod Community Centre. The sets were built by Keith, painted by a well-known local artist, and transported by Alun to the Centre in his tractor-drawn trailer. The production was prepared by a director from Covent Garden, Keith conducted and Barbara co-ordinated the whole project, persuading local companies and individuals to sponsor the event. Alun himself appropriately sang the first notes as Figaro and the whole concert received a rapturous reception from a packed audience.

Encouraged by this success we lost no time in developing plans for 1989. We were delighted to discover in Newtown's Theatr Hafren a venue ideally suited to our ambitions, with a large stage area, a 500-seat auditorium and, above all, a large orchestral pit. We quickly settled on Mozart's *The Magic Flute* with a full Welsh cast and chorus, drawn from the local community and students from the national music colleges. The conductor, Derek Clarke and the director, Ian Watt-Smith had both worked regularly with Welsh National Opera. We felt that a romantic opera was needed to accompany the Mozart and the choice fell on Bizet's *Carmen* with a student cast, all of whom attended a course similar to that of the previous year. Stephen Medcalf directed the first of his many memorable productions with the company, with his regular designer, Charles Edwards and Keith as conductor. Determined to make full use of the theatre's pit we organised a special Orchestral Summer Course for students from the Conservatoire who accompanied both operas, coached by WNO players. To have a full chorus for both operas would have been beyond even our ambitions, so we settled on a reduced version with only a lively chorus of local children as urchins in the opening scene.

The numbers of participants and staff had grown to over a hundred, stretching the organisation well beyond its 1988 limits. Such an event demanded a more suitable title, so we advertised it as a "Festival of Opera" by "Mid Wales Centre for Opera". Two separate Summer Courses were scheduled with a distinguished group of coaches including staff from WNO. Publicity throughout Wales and the music colleges had attracted great interest and

the student casts included several young singers who went on to international careers, such as Neal Davies, Susannah Glanville and Hilary Summers.

Barbara had widened her irresistible quest for sponsorship to great effect, while her various fund-raising events included the selling-off of passages and bars of the score of *The Magic Flute* (£1 a bar) to organisations such as the CBSO, to the performers and to the newly formed “Friends of Mid Wales Opera”, members of which generously offered accommodation to the performers and staff. Intense publicity in the regional press, TV and radio attracted considerable local interest with the result that ticket sales boomed. The choice of an all-Welsh cast for the Mozart was particularly fruitful, attracting relatives and admirers from far and wide. As Papageno, Alun Jones led a lively and full-bodied cast in the two performances of *The Magic Flute*, while three performances of the popular *Carmen* ensured that the theatre was comfortably filled throughout the week.

1990 brought two important developments; firstly the snappier name of “Mid Wales Opera”; and secondly, Welsh Arts Council funding to tour to some of the smaller theatres in Wales. Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* was a natural choice with its small cast and intimate orchestration. An excellent young student cast included two future international stars, soprano Mary Plazas and tenor John Daszak. With an orchestral ensemble of ten, our first six date tour, to venues from Brecon to Harlech, was eagerly greeted by opera-starved audiences who begged us to return on a regular basis.

For contrast in the Festival we ventured into the heavier romantic repertoire with *Tosca*, our first Puccini opera. Maturer voices were needed for the principal roles so auditions were held in London for our first professional soloists. Sadly our choice for the title role fell seriously ill, but we were lucky to find a replacement in Mary Lloyd Davies, who had already sung the role with WNO. The *Carmen* directorial team returned and the result was a resounding success. It included one of MWO’s most memorable moments in the “Te Deum” at the end of Act One. The principals sang fortissimo on stage; the chorus slowly descended through the audience, singing lustily and waving incense; an off-stage organ was relayed to the rafters of the theatre; and finally the Newtown Silver Band burst out from underneath the seating in the auditorium. Truly spectacular!

The combination of the full-voiced regional Welsh singers with the lively Conservatoire student body proved ideal for the operas, and the growth of the “Friends of Mid Wales Opera” encouraged us to organise other events which helped keep our chorus singing together; Christmas *Messiahs* in St. Mary’s Church, Welshpool, two one-act operas performed in Gregynog and social events including the first of many “Carols and Mulled Wine” in Meifod. The Friends were later to start other annual events, including a regular musical Summer Garden Party.

“Fortune favours the brave” and in 1991 our choice of Verdi’s *Otello* was by far the most ambitious undertaking in our short history. Once again, luck was on our side. Jeffrey

Lawton had already sung the title role many times, in performances with WNO, Covent Garden and in Paris; he persuaded the rising young baritone from Opera North, Keith Latham, to join the cast as Iago; Mary Lloyd Davies was keen to add Desdemona to her repertoire and the result was a trio of first-class principals. Such a major work demanded a far larger chorus so we doubled the numbers of previous years to over forty, with a sprinkling of professionals to boost the decibels. We had no difficulty in persuading Conservatoire orchestral students to take part in such a prestigious work. Stephen returned to direct while Keith conducted the four performances. Inspired by the quality of the principals and the sublime opera, all the performers and instrumentalists sang and played their hearts out.

The hilarious production of *The Barber of Seville* by Christopher Newell, the first of his many with MWO, was a brilliant contrast for the touring show. His frequently zany and colourful approach to opera provided us with perfect couplings for the more serious works in our repertoire in subsequent years. Large and enthusiastic audiences came for the weekend to see both operas and enjoy the beautiful Mid Wales countryside.

The company had now established a routine with its annual Festival and Tour which it maintained successfully over the following decade. The tours of both operas expanded to over seventy venues across the UK, from Barrow-in-Furness in the North down to Truro in the distant South, and including such prestigious theatres as Snape Maltings, Llandudno's North Wales Theatre and Buxton Opera House. There was one rain-sodden visit to Dublin, while two open-air Summer Evening performances under the aegis of English Heritage each attracted audiences of over five thousand. We were becoming recognised as the ideal company for developing the talents of young professionals and recent graduates; these included several artists who have gone on to distinguished international careers, including sopranos Gail Pearson and Susan Gritton, mezzo Leah-Marian Jones, tenors Peter Auty and Peter Hoare and baritone Christopher Maltman. The company also achieved national acclaim as recipient of two prestigious Prudential Opera Awards in 1994 and 1996 for "Excellence and Creativity, Innovation and Accessibility in the Arts". Barbara's incredible work over the years as MWO's administrator and fund-raiser was rewarded in 2004 with an MBE for "Services to Opera in Wales".

The first decade ended in what we call our "Glory Years". With a substantial grant from the new Lottery Fund, in consecutive years we were able to mount three of opera's real monsters, all directed by Stephen Medcalf and conducted by Keith. Verdi's *Aida* had not received a performance in Wales for thirty years. No elephants were involved, but otherwise the production contained all we could wish for; a chorus of over sixty, a group of professional dancers for the ballet and a 45-piece orchestra, including the four original Egyptian trumpets that had been used for *Aida's* first English performance in 1879. Every seat in the theatre was occupied and the performance received rave notices in the national

press. The next two years saw two more large-scale productions, of Puccini's *Turandot* and Gounod's *Faust*, both with the same impressive numbers of singers and players.

When the Lottery honeymoon came to an end, financial realities took over the company, with only one annual production becoming possible. With retirement from the Conservatoire we lost the invaluable link with the students and large-scale productions proved no longer affordable so we concentrated our efforts on the ever-expanding tour, while maintaining other related events, including a variety of educational projects. Between 2007 and 2009 we handed over firstly to Michael Penn as administrator, and then to Nicholas Cleobury as artistic director. They took over the baton with admirable expertise and enthusiasm in a financial climate not as favourable as the one which smiled on the company's first few years.