

Noises Off - Sound Effects in Opera Recordings **Some thoughts from Paul Corfield Godfrey**

In the course of preparing the ongoing series of CD issues of my 'epic scenes from *The Silmarillion*' (based on the mythology of JRR Tolkien)¹ it was I suppose inevitable that the vexed questions of sound production, and particularly sound effects, should rear their heads. The specific discussions which I have had regarding these have led me to consider in more general terms the particular issues that arise with respect to such matters, when a dramatic or operatic performance is being recreated in the studio for the benefit of the home listener. Most reviewers, and I suspect most audiences, are relatively indifferent to the subject unless something actually goes wrong; but at the same time I have no doubt that the judicious employment of such techniques can be every bit as important as the actual performance in conveying the music to the ear of the unsuspecting auditor. And composers too should take cognizance of the impact that such issues may have on the manner in which their music is perceived, more so than I suspect many do in practical terms.

Nowadays, when so many audio releases of opera derive from live stage performances (whether or not edited together with subsequent 'patching sessions') the matter of sound effects has indeed often become almost an irrelevance. The producer of the recording has to take the sound as it comes from the theatre, complete with any incidental noises that arise from the sometimes apparently demented decisions of the stage director. But this was most certainly not always the case, and the earlier history of sound recordings serves to demonstrate some quite violent shifts of opinion regarding the matter of 'sound effects' over the years.

In the 1950s when full-length opera recordings in the studio began to blossom with the arrival of the LP disc (the representation on disc in the 78 rpm had been patchy at best), there was little argument about the matter. The principal concern of the recording engineer was to get down onto tape the music of the relevant score, and in the days before stereo even the movement of characters around the stage was a consideration of secondary importance. Those producers like Walter Legge who attempted to achieve some sense of atmosphere in such operas as his 1953 EMI *Hänsel und Gretel*² were few and far between. The attitude of EMI was better illustrated by the 'hands-off' approach demonstrated in their Berlin 1956 *Meistersingers*³ under Rudolf Kempe. In the roll-call of the Masters Wagner specifically states in his stage directions at one point "Sachs laughs". Well, not in Berlin he didn't. Even when the composer had trenchantly required onstage sounds such as Puccini's motor horns and tugboat siren in *Il Tabarro*⁴, the fastidious 1955 EMI producer in Rome deliberately suppressed the 'unmusical' noises which Puccini had so inconsiderately notated in his score (thankfully a precedent which has not been followed in subsequent recordings).

It was John Culshaw at Decca who, as in so many other things concerned with the recording of operatic scores, decisively broke with such models in his 1958 Vienna *Rheingold*⁵ which formed the first part of what remains the definitive set of the Wagner *Ring*. In a lengthy essay included in the booklet released with the LPs in 1959 he went to some lengths to explain and justify his decisions to attempt to simulate a theatrical production, not only by the use of stereo to move his characters about the stage, but also to depict Wagner's many requirements for stage noises, only some of which – such as the eighteen anvils behind the scenes – were actually notated in the music. He even attempted to obtain some gold bars from a local Viennese bank to be stacked in an attempt to imitate the piling up of the gold in the final scene, although he had to be content with the tin bars that were all that the bank would actually let him borrow. In his memoir *Ring Resounding* he confesses that he found the result disappointing, although he was more perturbed by one critical comment that the moment when Wotan flung the Ring onto the hoard sounded more like a pebble being thrown into a chamber pot. "It struck us later," he ruefully concludes, "that if we *had* thrown a pebble into a chamber pot it might have turned out better."

It might have been thought that Culshaw's experiments in *Rheingold* were in part promoted by the fact that in the original LP release Decca had failed to provide a booklet giving the text and translation of the opera itself, and that he was thereby attempting to make good a perceived dramatic deficit in the presentation of the work. Actually it appears that the decision not to provide the text was a last-minute decision by budget-conscious executives at Decca who were far from convinced that the LP set would sell in sufficient quantities to justify the cost. This practice was not at all uncommon at this period: in the field of Strauss, both Decca's 1955 *Die Frau ohne Schatten*⁶ and EMI's 1956 *Der Rosenkavalier*⁷ required the purchaser to incur additional expenditure to obtain the text and translation of the opera (in booklets expressly printed for the purpose by the record companies themselves). How many purchasers actually undertook the further expense might be regarded as doubtful; I remember in the mid-1970s finding brand-new copies of both the Strauss booklets on sale in London, at a date well after the sets in question had been reissued at mid-price and now came complete with texts and translations.

Having got the bit between his teeth, Culshaw went on to make a positive feature of his use of sound effects to produce a theatrical experience in what became dubbed as Decca's 'sonicstage' productions. In 1962 the hammering on the anvil in the First Act of *Siegfried*⁵ – which had already been delegated to an assisting percussionist on Melchior's 78 rpm set in 1929 sessions⁸ – was expanded to include a whole raft of other smithying noises, and Culshaw admits that his team had to "experiment a great deal with the filing of the sword" to such an extent that the percussionists were "exhausted after hours and hours of beating, banging and filing". Similarly in his later 1967 set of Strauss's *Elektra*⁹ Culshaw not only provided all the whip strokes and other sounds notated in the score, but also added voices where Strauss had requested them, including the moment when Chrysothemis runs onto the scene "howling like a wounded beast." I am not sure precisely what sort of effect Strauss had intended here, but Marie Collier's bleating (like a highly stressed nanny goat) must surely be one of the most hideous noises ever perpetrated on record – it is no surprise that no other studio recording of the opera has ever attempted to emulate the sound. In a similar way in *Siegfried*⁵ the clanking of hammers and files in Act One often cuts across the music in a manner that is far from desirable, and all later studio recordings of the music have carefully restricted the beating to that which Wagner actually notated so precisely in the score. Even the more random effects can become predictable with repetition.

It was not long however before other record producers got in on the act. The second Christoff recording of *Boris Godunov*¹⁰ in 1962 launched EMI into the business of 'stereo direction' with the employment of clumping boots and slamming doors which, while supposedly sounding theatrical, in fact came across as dramatically risible. The BBC on the other hand entered enthusiastically into the trend, adding not only a multitude of sound effects but also – as in their late 1960s studio-based recordings of Vaughan Williams's *Hugh the Drover* and *Sir John in love* – altering the texts and adding spoken narration to make the progress of narrative clear to home listeners. French Decca had done the same with a *Carmen* in the early 1950s, with disastrous results for sales outside French-speaking territories; the BBC, without the need for commercial potentialities to restrain them, continued with the practice for much longer with consequences that can still be heard on current CD sets of Phyllis Tate's *The lodger*¹¹ and many other broadcast relays of the same period. Even as late as 1979 they were still at it, adding the sound of swirling seawater, tropical birds squawking in the jungle canopy and a gurgling fountain that sounds like a badly draining bath coming close to obscuring the music in their set of Delius's *The magic fountain* (the CD set has not been available for many years). Since these unwanted additions were grafted into the actual recorded sound, they can presumably no longer be deleted and must be tolerated for the sake of rare material otherwise unavailable.

This brings us to another issue, that of the artificial manipulation of the recorded acoustic itself. Although some attempts had been made to realise this in terms of mono sound (in the Legge production of *Hänsel und Gretel*² already mentioned, for example, where it occasioned some evident difficulties with bass resonance when the matter of digital remastering for CD arose), it only really became feasible with the advent of stereo; and again the pioneer in this field was John Culshaw. Not

so much in his 1964 *Götterdämmerung*⁵ with its deliberate 'drained' acoustic for the Norns and its notorious conversion of a tenor into a baritone for Siegfried disguised as Gunther, but in his earlier 1959 Karajan *Aida*¹² where Culshaw in a booklet note drew specific attention to his handling of the voices of the priests in the temple, with the echoing sounds of the interior of the temple in Acts One and Four contrasted with the effect of the sound floating through the night sky during the opening scene of Act Three. In his unfinished autobiography *Putting the record straight* (published posthumously) he even admits to the fact that the studio equipment at that period was inadequate to the task, producing tape overloads in the Triumphal Scene which could not be overcome; and some critics at the time complained that the dynamic range of the recording meant that elements in the score were simply inaudible when reproduced on most domestic equipment.

Deliberately altered colouring of this sort was of course entirely contrary to the earlier ethos of simply capturing on disc the sounds of the music as heard in the opera house or the concert hall, where an offstage chorus is after all simply an offstage chorus heard from whatever the acoustic of the backstage area is in that particular location. But it cannot be denied that the results were mightily impressive, not only in adding a sense of atmosphere and mystery to the texture in a manner that the composers clearly had in mind, but also in providing an extension of the stage for Valkyries riding in the air, offstage brass in many different contexts, and so on. In due course indeed such facilities came to be incorporated into some newly built concert halls such as Symphony Hall in Birmingham, where the acoustic of the auditorium itself could be manipulated to modify the sound produced. But Culshaw surely went too far, for example, in the closing bars of his 1963 recording of Britten's *Albert Herring*, where his attempt to mirror the throwing of the wreath into the audience was portrayed by an electronic sort of whoop which went completely against the whole sound of the composer's orchestral palette. Fortunately this sort of excess was very much an exception and remains so, although some composers have more recently imported this sort of effect into their actual orchestration such as David del Tredici's wailing siren in *In memory of a summer's day* and others of his Alice scores, with deliberately comic results.

Some other producers also sought to produce specially engineered sounds on the voices of their characters, sometimes with decidedly uneasy results. For the Colin Davis 1969 recording of Berlioz's *Les Troyens*¹³ the Philips team took the decision to portray the ghosts who appear to Aeneas in Act Five as the promptings of his inner thoughts, setting the voices close to the microphone in a dead acoustic which was then amplified. It must be admitted that the results are far from satisfactory, and indeed serve if anything to lessen the theatrical impact of a scene where Berlioz had already created a sense of eerie suspense by his use of violin harmonics and by calling for the darkening of the auditorium (itself an unusual request in pre-Wagnerian days). DG engineers on the other hand made no attempt to provide any sort of supernatural acoustic for the apparitions of dead composers in Act One of Pfitzner's *Palestrina*, with the result that the 1975 recording seriously lacks atmosphere at what should be a chillingly dramatic scene. Other companies too have singularly failed to rise to the occasion when composers specifically request the illusion of distance in their music, and it is instructive here to compare the relatively tame results in the 1989 Sinopoli/DG recording of *Tannhäuser* with the stunningly dramatic 1970 Solti/Decca recording of the same opera.

During this period, too, composers have embraced enthusiastically the opportunities afforded them to provide these additional colours in their writing. In the prelude to Act Two of his 1970 television opera *Owen Wingrave* Britten asks for specific senses of distance from the microphones for his tenor soloist and children's choir, in a manner which clearly shows his recognition of the results obtained by Culshaw in his productions of the *War Requiem*¹⁴ in 1961 and even back to *The turn of the screw* in the 1955 mono recording. More modern composers have rushed to embrace the possibilities of amplification and even distortion of voices for dramatic effect, sometimes being very specific in their demands; although, like many such electronic devices, after some years even the simple reproduction of the originally stipulated equipment can cause problems in the context of later live stagings.

What it all comes down to in the end, of course, is a simple matter of taste. But even here, when the results should be uncontroversial, discrepancies will still arise. When recording the end of *Götterdämmerung*⁵ John Culshaw inserted a sound effect (borrowed from a German radio station) to represent the burning of the Gibichung hall, but in his memoirs he saw the need to justify this: “It was not indicated *as a noise* in the score. There was equally no reason why Wagner should have thought of mentioning it as a noise, for in demanding what amounted to the collapse of a substantial stage set he was assured of any amount of noise by the nature of the requirement.” Such considerations weighed as nothing with the DG producers of Karajan’s 1970 studio recording, or with the Eurodisc engineers for Janowski in 1983; but then the EMI team for Haitink in 1991 furnished a positive avalanche of sound in what sounds like an enthusiastic municipal firework display. What is then most disconcerting of all is to see the ultra-realistic Metropolitan Opera 1990 DVD production of the scene, where massive granite blocks (presumably made of polystyrene) subside onto the stage with not the slightest smidgeon of any sound that penetrates through the maelstrom of sound which Levine is simultaneously conjuring up from the orchestra pit. So there.

MusicWeb reviews of the discs cited may be found at

- ¹ http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2019/Mar/Spring_2019_1.pdf [Brian Wilson]
- ² http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2005/June05/Humperdinck_hansel_8110897-98.htm [John Quinn]
- ³ http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2018/Dec/Wagner_Meistersinger_survey.pdf [Ralph Moore]
- ⁴ http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2012/Sept12/Puccini_great_operas_RRC9011.htm [Paul Corfield Godfrey]
- ⁵ http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2012/Oct12/Wagner_Ring_Solti_4783702.htm [Paul Corfield Godfrey]
- ⁶ http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2018/Dec/Strauss_Frau_survey.pdf [Ralph Moore]
- ⁷ http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2018/Aug/Strauss_Rosenkavalier_survey.pdf [Ralph Moore]
- ⁸ http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2015/May/Wagner_Siegfried_PACO114.htm [Paul Corfield Godfrey]
- ⁹ http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2017/Sep/Strauss_Elektra_4831494.htm [Paul Corfield Godfrey]
- ¹⁰ <http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2002/Nov02/BorisGodunov.htm> [Tony Haywood]
- ¹¹ http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2015/Oct/Tate_lodger_REAM2119.htm [Paul Corfield Godfrey]
- ¹² http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2007/July07/Verdi4_Farr.htm [Robert J Farr]
- ¹³ http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2019/Feb/Berlioz_Troyens_survey.pdf [Ralph Moore]
- ¹⁴ http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2013/Oct13/Britten_requiem_4785433.htm [Dan Morgan]; http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2006/Sept06/Britten_War_Requiem_4757511.htm [John Quinn]