

The Oldie July 2019

RICHARD OSBORNE

Kent Opera:
A Documentary Film

A wonderful posthumous tribute (freely available online at www.kentopera.org.uk) to this bravest and best of English touring companies. Kent Opera would have been 50 this year had it not been killed off in 1989 by the Arts Council in an act of government-sponsored treachery that lives in infamy to this day.

The company was founded in 1969 by Norman Platt, a maverick genius with a passion for quality and a rare capacity for spotting talent. Born in Lancashire in 1920, he knew the world of music inside out when, noticing that England had no touring opera, he resolved to create a company that would journey west from Canterbury to Bath. After reading theology at King's College, Cambridge, he had studied Lieder with the great German mezzo Elena Gerhardt, sung with Sadler's Wells, and served as a lay clerk at St Paul's Cathedral, where he met countertenor and early-music specialist Alfred Deller whose pioneering confederacy he joined.

'If you're going to run a market garden, you don't appoint someone who likes lettuce; that way you'll get a rabbit' was a typical Platt obiter dictum. Another was 'All art is entertainment but not all entertainment is art' — though, ironically, the one false note in his 2001 memoir *Making Music* was his belief that cultural relativism, that Gadarene rush to the bottom, was 'a fading fad'.

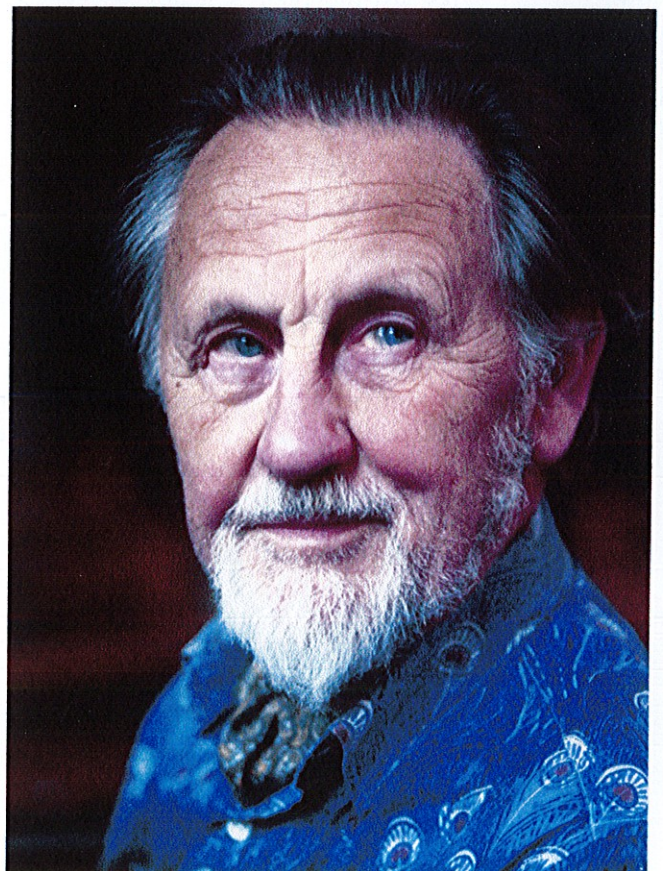
Kent's success was rooted in musically vibrant stagings played in English, on a human scale, in small theatres. A good wine needs no bush. Trust was established, audiences came and audiences stayed, whether it was Monteverdi or Mozart, Verdi or Britten, Tippett or Judith Weir. (None of your crossover stuff and never a note of Puccini.)

Kent Opera didn't sign only gifted young singers; it signed barely-known conductors (the first being Roger Norrington), directors and composers of superb quality. There was the 23-year-old Nicholas Hytner plucked from a staff job at ENO to direct Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* when Harold Pinter

had second thoughts; and the young Richard Jones, signed up alongside the 31-year-old Judith Weir, now Master of the Queen's Music, to direct her hugely successful Kent Opera commission *A Chinese Night at the Opera*.

When Platt retired, in 1989, he entrusted the company to the 29-year-old David Pickard, who now runs the Proms, and Iván Fischer, revered international conductor, whose devotion to the local, the first-rate and the socially engaged in his native Budapest has a vibrancy and integrity that are light years away from Mr Service's raucous proletarianism.

Kent Opera's work lives on in the memory, and in the imaginations of those of us brave enough to believe, as Iván Fischer believes, that something like this might — just might — happen again.



Never a note of Puccini: talent-spotter extraordinaire Norman Platt (1920-2004)