

An Afternoon with Sir John Tomlinson, 11 February 2018

12:30pm: DVD: 'Das Liebesverbot', Act 1
2.00pm: An afternoon with Sir John Tomlinson

DVD: Das Liebesverbot Act 1

Wagner's rarely performed early comic opera (1836), based on Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, enjoys its Spanish debut in a new production by director Kaspar Holten.

The lively score boasts clear Italian, French and Weberian influences that predate the composer's mature voice, yet the music continually delights with the unmistakable emergence of Wagner's precocious genius. His adaptation of the Bard's play reflects the rebellious mood of a revolutionary Germany, vindicating sensual love and attacking the fanatical repression of sexuality by a puritanical and hypocritical authority.

Ivor Bolton conducts a vibrant cast with the chorus and orchestra from the Teatro Real, Madrid (2016).

An afternoon with legendary English bass, Sir John Tomlinson



Sir John Tomlinson with President Colleen Chesterman

The first contact with our honoured guest was the sound of a deep sonorous voice followed by a glimpse of white hair, braces and red pants. This was Hans Sachs or perhaps der Wanderer out for coffee and cake on a hot Sunday afternoon. First impressions of John Tomlinson were of a man very comfortable with himself and the world, someone who was confident and social, in command, a charismatic personality that didn't take himself too seriously but was able to pull off sartorial exuberance. And what followed once he took the stage at the Goethe Institute with our President Coleen Chesterman didn't disappoint. So on a hot and humid Sunday afternoon in February we were having an audience with Sir John Tomlinson. It was a very well attended event with one of the biggest turn outs for quite a while – we had to pull out extra chairs to get everyone seated. This was not surprising given the pulling power of the main event, a Wagnerian star who is both very popular and renowned for his singing-acting. The word legend is bandied about too freely these days but to attach it to someone like this great British bass baritone is both banal and an understatement. It is fair to say that most of those gathered had seen and heard this great artist in one of the many roles he has created in a career that is in its 5th decade and counting. Our President gently guided or prompted John Tomlinson to tell the story of his career from the very beginning. This he did with aplomb in an assured performance that betrayed the man's facility with story-telling. And let's mention the speaking voice which is as deep and compelling as his singing voice.

Born in the north of England Sir John studied engineering in the early 1960s before embarking on a stage career. It was apt that he related - as an aside – a thought that came to him whilst looking out to the harbour, his engineering training and mind still turning to issues such as trying to calculate the degree to which the steel of the Sydney Harbour Bridge would expand in the heat of February. An interesting insight into Sir John who would forensically calculate and engineer the personality and circumstance of the character he is portraying. No doubt that engineering training stood him in good stead for the work required to undertake the "Personenregie" of a Wotan or Hagen or Hans Sachs in the major houses of Germany. He did speak of the directors that guided his roles but alas not in enough detail for my satisfaction (the tyranny of time and so much to get through stepping in).

This was an opportunity to see and hear close up a singer-actor that for me has set the standard to which I judge Wagnerian performances. John Tomlinson was my first live Wotan in the great Harry Kupfer production at Bayreuth (1988-1992). He sang all the Wotans from the youngish chaotic go getter in "Das Rheingold", the troubled (mis) manager in "Die

Walkure” and the ageing has-been in “Siegfried”. It was interesting to hear Sir John speak of his vision of the “Ring” with Society President Coleen Chesterman, which clearly implied that Wotan has to be performed by the same singer/actor in order to successfully develop and present the huge emotional arc of the role. Sir John’s Wotan is a tragic figure with human flaws (not godlike at all). From the time he sacrifices one of his eyes to wrest a branch from the World Ash Tree he sets in motion an inevitable catastrophe that will engulf the gods and pass the management baton to humans. Sir John very carefully and engagingly described how Wotan carves the laws and contracts that give the world structure and organisation into the spear fashioned from the World Ash Tree. The “Ring” shows a figure that is not in control despite moments of delusion. No doubt that having sung in many “Ring” productions Sir John would have come to a personal vision of the tetralogy or at least formulated one as a part of his scientific/mathematic engineering methodology. I will never forget the entry of a defeated resigned Wotan after the death of Siegfried (“Götterdämmerung”, Bayreuth, 1992), shoulders hunched, coming to pay his respect to the fallen “hero” and throwing his broken spear into what would become the funeral pyre. A moment that was heartbreaking, totally invented by Harry Kupfer but so totally of the “Ring”. Was it John Tomlinson or a stand in that was responsible for that wonderful bit of acting? I didn’t ask.

Assisted by short but evocatively sung excerpts from the various music dramas you could see (and hear) why he was (and is in our memories) one of the truly great interpreters of the role of Wotan. These days aged 70 years up he feels that he no longer has the stamina and strength required to prosecute such massive roles. Nevertheless singing the opening words of the Tsar from Mussorgsky’s “Boris Godunov” there seem to be no lack of energy, commitment, understanding and bravura. The lasting impression for me is of an actor-singer that is charming, charismatic and highly intelligent. Not just a bass-baritone who has carefully managed his instrument but someone who has an opinion on what he is singing based on research as well as intuition particularly regarding the role he is portraying as well as contributing to the narrative of the production he is in. As a director manqué I could imagine that a cast with John Tomlinson in it would make life slightly more easy/interesting/challenging but at the end of the day make whatever contribution I may have made to a production look and sound even

better. I look forward to seeing and hearing him in Barry Kosky's production of Dmitri Shostakovich's "The Nose". Thank you to those who managed to obtain the presence of one of the truly great Wagnerian interpreters for a Sunday afternoon.

By Esteban Insausti