

## TAVERNER

I had first met Max and The Fires of London, which at that time were called The Pierrot Players, at the Dartington Summer School in August 1970, and had subsequently attended several of the Fires concerts at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. It was an important matter to be present at the world premiere of Max's opera *Taverner* at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden on 12 July 1972. This was a great event in London's musical life. The Royal Opera house rarely presents operas by living composers. It was one of those occasions which everyone attended. The opera enjoyed great success both with the public and with the critics. I had been bowled over by my first view of The Pierrot Players and by Max's music, and seeing *Taverner* substantially enhanced my over-all enthusiasm.

In October 1975 I accepted Max's invitation to become both the manager of The Fires of London, as it was now called, and also to be his own manager. I dived in at the deep end, as they say, by taking The Fires on a twelve concert tour, which was the Contemporary Music Network tour, around the UK, under the auspices of the Arts Council. It was in Liverpool, on this tour, in November 1975, that Max first broached the knotty problem of *Taverner*. The difficulty was that [Sir John Tooley](#), the General Director of The Royal Opera house at Covent Garden, had asked Max to write a new opera. Max felt that unless the Royal Opera House should revive *Taverner*, thus showing a continuing interest in a work which had already been a success king upon another project of a brand new opera.. At that period, of my life, everything was completely new to me. I did not know that Max was always keen that the organisations which commissioned him should continue to have active interest far beyond that first performance.

At the meeting which I had following that tour, Sir John re-iterated his desire to have Max write a new opera for Covent Garden. I, for my part, said that Max felt he could not entertain the idea of a new opera until after *Taverner* had been revived. Matters continued in this fashion for a period of several years. I would have a meeting with Sir John every few months, but nothing changed. Sir John said he would do his best to get a revival of *Taverner*. In the meantime Max was snowed under with commissions, and he wrote two operas for The Fires of London – *The Martyrdom of St. Magnus* which opened the first St. Magnus Festival in June 1977, and *The Lighthouse* for the 1980 International Edinburgh Festival. Both of these works toured extensively, and were being taken up by other companies.

In November 1981 London Weekend Television decided that they wanted to make a documentary about Max. It was to go on The South Bank Show, the long-running series of films made about artists. [Melvyn Bragg](#) would present the show, and [Bryan Izzard](#) was the director. This was to be unlike any other of the various documentaries which were made about Max in that it was to be shot almost entirely at the LWT's own studios on London's South Bank. The exception was some minutes from *The Rainbow*, the children's music-theatre work, and this was shot on location in Orkney.

I talked at length to Bryan as to what should be presented, and we came to a very handsome conclusion. The Fires of London would be used for *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*, *Ave Maris Stella* and the *Purcell Fantasy and*

*Two Pavans*. The Fires would use its own costumes and set for the two theatrical works. The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra would play excerpts from Max's latest large-scale orchestral work - *Symphony No2. 2* and from the [Suite from The Boy Friend](#), drawn from the Ken Russell film. Finally, and most importantly, there would be an extract from [Act 1 Scene 4 of Taverner](#). For this, LWT would make its own set and costumes, and four singers would be employed and they had to learn their parts as if they were going to perform it on stage.

The whole process was to be over a period of eight days in January 1982. The first rehearsals were in a small room above the main area of Waterloo Station. It happened that there was a strike during those rehearsals days, and the entire station was completely devoid of people. The atmosphere was eerie, but everyone carried on regardless. The first day was for the singers with their pianist, Andrew Ball, rehearsing with Andrew Ball as the director telling them how they should enact the scene. The following day was for the Fires, again with Bryan as director. Max was conducting these Fires' works. After that, the action moved to the LWT studios. The first day the orchestral music, including, *Taverner* was conducted by John Carewe, with [Neil Jenkins as Taverner and Michael Rippon as The Jester](#), and recorded. The following day all the Fires' works were recorded. On the final day there was a long interview between Melvyn Bragg and Max. At no point during all the run-up to the filming or during the filming had Melvyn Bragg made any kind of appearance, or shown any interest. It was all down to Bryan. When it came to the interview, Bragg threw out a statement which more than greatly annoyed Max. He said that most of his works were controversial and that most people objected to them. At which point Max blew his top and screamed back at Bragg "how DARE you say that to me"? Everyone wondered whether all this might be cut out when it came to the editing, but Melvyn Bragg decided that it should be left in and so it remained. The film was a co-production between LWT and [Rainer Moritz](#), a company producing arts films in Germany, and so it was shown both in the UK and in Germany. The most important part of the film was the excerpt from *Taverner*.

One day later that year in 1982, I opened The Times, and read, to my astonishment, the announcement that *Taverner* was to be revived at Covent Garden the next season in June 1983. It was to be the same team as previously, namely [Edward Downes](#) as conductor, Michael Geliot as director and Ralph Koltai as designer. The cast was to be

Taverner: Ragnar Ulfung  
Rose Parrowe Sarah Walker  
Death: Alan Oke  
Abbot: Raymond Herincx  
King: Noel Mangin  
Priest: James Bowman

There were two changes from the original 1972 cast – Alan Oke replacing Benjamin Luxon and Sarah Walker replacing Gillian Knight.

From the moment I knew that the revivals would take place, I was involved in many discussions both within and outside Covent Garden. The main thrust was that Max had been severely disappointed with many aspects of the production in 1972. This

was not an unusual occurrence for composers. Max had his vision, both as composer and librettist, and he felt that this vision had been compromised. Here was a chance to make good. I was the person whose job it was to attempt to affect the necessary changes.

The opera is based on various episodes from the life and legends about the life of John Taverner, one of the outstanding English composers of the Tudor period. His story is of a man whose conversion to a ruthless system of belief causes him to deny essential parts of himself. Taverner was supposed to have stopped composing at the time of the Reformation, and to have turned instead to the persecution of that same church which he had previously celebrated with his music.

Max had devoted much of his life since the mid 1950s to the research of John Taverner, and to the composing of the music throughout the 1960s completing it in 1968. The fact that Covent Garden had put the opera on at all in 1972 was due to the endless support from within the hierarchy of the Royal Opera by Edward Downes. As he once told me, “nobody, but nobody in the house wanted it to happen”.

At that period of his life, Max was much involved with the film director Ken Russell, for whom Max had written the music to two films – *The Devils* and *The Boy Friend*. For some months it looked as if Russell was to direct *Taverner*, but the plans fell through and Michael Geliot was brought in instead. Nobody paid much, if any, heed to what Max had written in his stage directions. The first thing to do was to arrange a meeting between Max with Michael Geliot, Ralph Koltai and Edward Downes. This proved to be completely impossible owing to the complexities of everyone’s diaries. Max decided that I should go to a meeting instead of him, but even that could not be arranged, and so finally it was my husband Michael, my husband, who represented Max at the meeting which was held in Amsterdam. Michael had the list of requests for changes which Max dearly wished for, and sincerely hoped might be able to be achieved in this revival. The list was long, but here are a few of the items:

- The opera calls for a small band of on-stage musicians playing their own music (composed by Max) in two of the scenes. In the original production the on-stage band, which was David Munrow and the Early Music Consort was definitely **not** on stage, but off-stage and was barely audible
- At the moment of Tavernier’s arrest in the monastery, Max asks for twelve drummers, in costume, to approach from afar, growing ever louder. In the original production, two drummers played off-stage
- In the final act, there should be a great crowd assembled in the Market Place in Boston, Lincolnshire, for the auto-da-fé. However, in the original production this chorus was there, but the only part of them which was visible was their heads, which appeared through holes in a huge cloth which was spread over the entire chorus.
- Max had written that there should be a large dove which had been completely ignored.

Michael returned very downhearted from the meeting. He had been told that Max's stage instructions were completely unrealisable and that he (Max) had no experience, and didn't know what he was talking about, and that everything should be left to the experts. Ralph Koltai told Michael that when he came to be the director for the production originally, he didn't even read Max's stage directions. Nevertheless they did at least adhere to some of Max's requests, including the dove.

Nevertheless, I then proceeded to have many conversations with people in charge of different departments at Covent Garden. Things would have been better had there been one person in over-all charge of the production, but that was not the way that Covent Garden worked. It seemed as if there was going to be an on-stage band, which was good new, but not with David Munrow, who had, alas, died in 1976. I became more hopeful that things would work out. How was I to try to get the twelve drummers, in costume, which Max requested. Two departments were involved, namely the musicians and the costumes. After several extremely frustrating calls, I finally got to speak to the person in whose gift, it seemed, it was to accede to my request.

- "How many drummers did you say you want?"
- JA – "“Twelve”"
- "In costume?"
- JA – "Yes"
- "Why does Max want so many drummers?"
- JA – *Shrieking at full volume* "**Because he wants a loud noise.**"

I got my drummers.

The rehearsal period was very short. It was the end of the season. The chorus should have started rehearsals much earlier in the season, but this did not happen, and they were nowhere nearly as prepared as they should have been. The set, much praised by critics, was ultra-modern, in contrast to the Tudor costumes. The stage was dominated by giant scales which revolved, and which also lifted upwards. The on-stage band, which was playing on a platform, was trucked on to the stage on wheels. At one of the rehearsals, the harpsichord which was on this moving platform, wobbled and fell off, hitting the player as it did so. I gasped audibly, and a voice behind me said "don't worry, the harpsichord is insured – ten thousand pounds have gone west"..

Max came to the dress rehearsal. It was a disaster. The chorus came on, didn't know where to go, and, shuffled around to try to get to their appointed places underneath the great cloth. They simply had not been rehearsed enough, or, one must reasonably ask, at all. Their opening chord came out all wrong. Max, in a blind fury, threw his score down, and rushed headlong out into Bow Street. This was now a crisis. I rushed out after him and caught up with him. He said that he was having nothing to do with this whole production, and was leaving to return back to Orkney. I can't say I blame him. His response was of course extreme, but, on the other hand, if this was the dress rehearsal, and there was nothing more that could be done to make at least that last scene, with the heads popping out of the cover, at least sound respectable, it was no wonder that he was in despair.

John Tooley had to be approached. This was going to be a major confrontation, and, frankly I did not feel up to this particular battle. I called Michael, and I arranged that he would have an urgent meeting with John Tooley. At that meeting, Michael told John Tooley of Max's great distress that the chorus did not know where to go, nor could they sing their parts properly, and another rehearsal had to somehow be squeezed into Covent Garden's already very tight schedule. John Tooley realised the seriousness of the situation, and did in fact put in that unscheduled extra rehearsal. After all, everyone's reputation was at stake, not only John Taverner (please excuse the pun).

Max did not leave for Orkney and attended the opera. The on-stage band played on-stage, without incident. The drummers marched in threateningly and loudly. The chorus quietly found their places, but nothing other than their heads was ever seen. Various other details were improved. Max found that the singing of all the soloists was vastly superior than it had been eleven years earlier. The public came in plentiful numbers for all the performances. Max had had his revival at Covent Garden, but he never did write that opera which John Tooley so earnestly wishes for. But that is another story – see *Resurrection*.

Following these events in June/July 1983, I was able to interest two other companies to mount Taverner. The first was in at the Royal Opera in Stockholm in November 1984 when the company presented had not one but two premiere of Max's operas on the same day. In the morning it was *The Lighthouse* performed in the Rotunda, and in the evening it was *Taverner* in the main house. It was the director of the Royal Opera, Lars af Malmberg who arranged for these wonders to happen. Alas, whilst the production of *The Lighthouse* was brilliant, *Taverner* was simply dreadful from virtually every point of view. So no joy there at all.

The other outing was with the Boston Opera Company in the USA in March 1986 under the guidance, if you can call it that, of [Sarah Caldwell](#). Sarah was a larger-than-life character in every sense of the word. As well as being huge in size, she was a conductor. She was a director. She ran the opera company. She had associations, and, presumably financial help, from Imelda Marcos of the Philippines. When I told Sally Groves at Schott that Sarah Caldwell was going to mount *Taverner*, her comment was "you poor thing". She had obviously been through the traumas I was about to experience.

Sarah busied herself with every detail, even going as far as making a trip to Kirkwall in Orkney to discuss the production with Max and the designer. I was called again and again to help. I had to find someone to write the programme note. I had to find singers to be brought from England. The reason for this was that Sarah was unable to hire American singers, because all the American agents refused to allow their singers to be employed by Sarah, because she took an unwarrantedly long time to pay their fees. Of course, I didn't know this at the time, and I was happy to recommend singers, and to give the contact details of their agents so that they could be employed.

Max and I spent quite some time in Boston for the rehearsals. Everything was terrible. Sarah was attempting to 'direct' at the same time as conducting the orchestra. Here were all these splendid musicians in the pit, totally at sea. Max felt all the time as if he just wanted to jump into the pit and to take over. Nobody knew where they should be

on the stage or where they should go. Light from overhead would come on to an empty spot on the stage, while a singer was singing in a totally different place, and nobody could see or hear him. Many was the evening when we came back to the flat we had rented for the occasion, and rolled around with laughter for hours at the horrors we had witnessed during the day.

I spoke to my friend, Richard Dyer, who was the critic of the *Boston Globe*, and he told me not to worry, as things would, somehow or other, come right in the end. He had seen this pattern of behaviour on many previous occasions. At the dress rehearsal, there were no dresses, because these had all been made in Canada, and had been impounded at the border, because Sarah had not paid for them. The night before the actual performance, the stage had to be varnished, and had not dried sufficiently, so that the shoes of the singers stuck, and they all had to lift their feet off the floor with their hands. Oh dearie me.

Once again Max felt that he just could not be associated with something which purported to be by him, but which such an utter shambles. But he stayed on – grimly. Somehow or other the opera happened. My memory of it is indistinct.

The day after the first performance, the three singers I had recommended from England, came to me to tell me that Sarah had promised they would receive their fees at this juncture, that is, after they had sung the first of their performances. Sarah, however, refused to even talk to them and would not pay their fees at that time. Somehow or other I managed to turn Sarah round, although by this time I was barely on speaking terms with her. Several months later, I received a call in London saying that I hadn't paid the bill for the flat which Max and I had stayed in. I said that they hadn't paid Paul Griffiths for the programme note which they had commissioned him to write, and so we would call it quits, and I paid Paul the money which he was owed with the money that should have paid for the flat. Not a success.

There was one more outing for *Taverner*. This time it was a recording to be made by the BBC in their Studios in Maida Vale 4-14 December 1996. The composer and conductor [Oliver Knussen](#) had been endeavouring for many years to conduct *Taverner*, and a previous attempt had fallen through, but now he pulled it off. Olly chose all the participants himself. The cast included Martyn Hill as Taverner and David Wilson-Johnson as Death/Jester. It was a huge undertaking for the BBC which doesn't usually do this sort of thing over such an extended period of days. But this was part of a series of 'specials' authorised by the BBC going towards the Millennium, with the composer and conductor George Benjamin in charge. This time there was nothing but joy at all the sessions, with the producer Anne McKay doing the honours. Champagne was drunk at the end. Max's mighty work was in the bag and was broadcast in April 1997. This recording was later issued as a CD by NMC Recordings.