

THE DOCTOR OF MYDDFAI

OPERA IN TWO ACTS

Matthew Epstein is a legend in his own lifetime. He worked at CAMI (Colombia Artists Management Inc.) in New York, the most powerful agency in the music industry, as head of the singers division. He acted as mentor and counsellor to numerous singers, past and present, and launched and developed the careers of such singers as Frederica von Stade, Catherine Malfitano, Samuel Ramey, Kathleen Battle and Renee Fleming. He was constantly advising opera houses on their casting. I had never come across him personally although I had considerable dealing with CAMI in connection with touring *The Fires of London* in the USA in 1983 and 1985, and with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra in 1988.

And so it was with considerable surprise that I received a phone call in May 1992 from [Matthew Epstein](#) himself informing me that he was to become the new chief executive and artistic director of the Welsh National Opera, and that he wanted to discuss something with me. Well, it didn't take much for me to work out that he would probably want to commission Max, and my heart sank.

September 1988 had seen the premiere of Max's opera *Resurrection* in Darmstadt in Germany. Max had been thinking about this opera since his days of his Harkness Fellowship to Princeton University in 1962- 1964, but the plan had not been realised until all those years later. And *Resurrection* had proved to be a disaster. The director had taken no notice whatsoever of Max's own libretto and stage instructions, and what had emerged was an entirely different animal. Max was totally shattered by the experience. Almost all of his previous dramatic works had been hugely successful and Max had a world-wide name for writing music for the stage which really worked. But it definitely had not worked at Darmstadt, and Max vowed that he would not write any more dramatic works because it was just too dangerous. Max was by no means the only composer to have suffered in this way at the hands of wilful directors.

So when I finally had my meeting with Matthew Epstein, and he put the proposition to me that he wanted to commission Max to write an opera for him at the Welsh National Opera, I told him that this was never going to work. The reason why Matthew was so overwhelmingly enthusiastic about Max was due to Ben Heppner. He was the Canadian tenor who had come under Matthew's wing, and, at the start of his career had sung the tenor role in Max's opera *The Lighthouse* in the production under the auspices of the Guelph Festival which had toured across Canada and had given several performances at the Expo in Vancouver in May 1986. Matthew had seized upon this and had decided that having a new work from Max for his Welsh National Opera was what he wanted to do.

I carefully explained the situation to Matthew, and thought that that would be the end of the matter. But Matthew is not one to be put off merely by obstacles in the path of what he wants to achieve. After some time he returned back to me with a startling proposal. What would Max think of the idea of having the proposed director in on the project from the very beginning, and that this director would create a libretto together

with Max? I liked the sound of this very much, and put it to Max, who, likewise, began to see glimmerings of a possibility of something that might work. He told me to tell Matthew to go ahead and to suggest someone for consideration. Matthew returned quickly with a name – David Pountney. David was of course extremely well known across the operatic world. He had been part of the famous triumvirate which ran the English National Opera during what is now universally acknowledged as its golden era. Previous to that, David had worked extensively at Welsh National Opera and at Scottish Opera, and was always enthusiastic about bringing new and lesser known operas to the public. David Pountney sounded like an exceedingly good idea, and the next stage was to bring him together with Max. This meeting took place at my flat, and both David and Max liked each other, and they decided that they would give it a go exactly along the lines which Matthew had indicated. The idea was that they would jointly come up with an idea for what the opera would be about. Matthew was insistent that whatever the topic, it must be Welsh. Nothing else would do.

Max had always had ideas for the topics he wanted to write a dramatic work. In fact they burnt holes in his head. On this occasion it was David who came up with the idea. In fact, the idea had come from a suggestion from a friend of his wife Jane. This friend had put forward the idea of a myth (or legend) in a location of a village called Myddfai which is on the edge of the Brecon Beacons in Wales. The legend roughly goes thus:

Once upon a time a shepherd was with his flock beside a lake. A beautiful girl appeared in the lake, and he fell in love with her. After passing the test of distinguishing her from her two sisters, he was allowed to marry her, on the condition that if he struck her three times, she would return to the lake, taking with her all the wealth she had brought him. During their life together, he did strike her three times, and she returned to the lake, but she left him and his descendants the gift of her healing powers. They became the Doctors of Myddfai.

Everyone was delighted with the subject for the opera, and the idea was that David and Max would collaborate all along with the writing of the libretto. But this did not happen. David wrote the libretto in its entirety, sending drafts to Max as he went along for approval, all of which were accepted without demur. In fact, David later joked that he had hoped that he would be entering into an acrimonious correspondence concerning the libretto which he would later be able to publish. There was no acrimony at all. .

Matthew's period to become the director of Welsh National Opera commenced officially in 1991. The agreement for the opera was confirmed in 1993, and the date for the premiere was set for June 1996. Michael, my husband, arranged the contract, which was for the largest amount of money that Max had ever had. Yes, it was all a long way ahead, but then that is entirely par for the course with these kinds of commissions. Everyone gets excited about what is going to happen, and then they all go off to their own busy lives, working their way through things that have been set in motion several years previously.. Max was frantically busy completing the ten concertos he was writing for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and he also had commitments with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, for both of which he had become Composer/Conductor.

It was a great shock to learn that Matthew Epstein was to leave Welsh National Opera in 1994. Clearly things had not worked out in the way either Matthew or the company wanted. This meant that it would be an entirely new person who would be taking over the reins concerning the commission. This person turned out to be Anthony Freud. He has worked at the WNO previously but his most recent job was Executive Producer of Opera for the Phillips Label in the Netherlands. Alison Riach was the continuity person, having been previously been assistant to Matthew and then to Anthony Freud. Virtually all my communications were with Alison. But most of the activity was with [David Pountney](#), as it was he who was putting the production together. That was, after all, his job. And I must say that it was with the greatest relief that all the administrative part of the commission was in the hands of someone who knew exactly what he wanted and how to go about getting it. David had a vast knowledge of singers, of designers, of lighting designers, and he was able to call on them. He always conferred with Max who was more than happy to concur. From my point of view, I was greatly relieved that the burden of finding and processing people for the jobs connected with a dramatic production was now entirely out of my hands. David asked that Max should listen to the singer who was proposed in the role of the doctor. This was arranged when Max would be participating at the Cheltenham Festival in 1995 and the young Paul Whelan from New Zealand came to sing to Max after one of the performances at the festival. Otherwise all the positions passed through on the nod.

I had one extremely disagreeable task, and that was to make a special journey for a meeting with Anthony Freud and Alison Riach. The purpose of this meeting was to inform them that Max was behind with his schedule for writing the opera, and, indeed, of completing the opera. This was very unusual. Max was extremely professional, and he always delivered on time. This was over a period of decades and covering a very large number of works. The only time that such a circumstance had occurred previously was in connection with *Resurrection* for Darmstadt. The reason for the delay in that case had been due to the death of his father's death and his mother's stroke, both happening at the same time. Welsh National Opera needed to have everything in place, with the music written and the piano reduction fully operational. There was no doubt that there would be a delay, and that this would cause WNO a great deal of inconvenience. There was nothing that either I or WNO could do about it. The music simply was not there. Both Anthony Freud and Alison Riach were very generous in their treatment of me. This was one of the very few times that I felt uncomfortable representing Max.

Max paid very particular attention to the WNO chorus. In that company, the chorus is not just an add-on. It is the very essence of what the company is about. There are two big chorus numbers in the opera, which are in Welsh, and Max took advice from a welsh-speaking composer so that what he wrote would be as authentic as possible. The opera itself is not simply an enactment of the legend/myth. David set it in the near future, with an un-named and mysterious disease lurking and spreading throughout. When Max had just finished the first act, he showed it to David. We were driving in a car, and I was sitting in the back next to David who was reading the score. When he came to the end of the act, he commented to Max, who was sitting in the front, that he had somehow envisaged that particular ending to be rather different. It was clear that he was a very able reader of scores. As we drew nearer towards the

first performances in July 1996, there were several visits to Cardiff, to see and hear 'works in progress.

There were three main characters in the opera. There is the Doctor, who appears to have magical healing powers but during the course of the opera seems to want to become a megalomaniac. There is the Ruler, in whose domain there is a mysterious disease, where large blotches appeared on the skin, which is gradually afflicting large numbers of the population, and who also succumbs to the disease himself. And there is the Child, to whom, throughout the opera, the Doctor is telling the myth/legend, and who, in the end, it is inferred, becomes the Doctor of Myddfai himself with magical healing powers. As well as Paul Whelan as The Doctor, [David Pountney](#) cast the young soprano Lisa Tyrrell as The Child, and the renowned bass Gwynne Howell as The Ruler. The design was to be done by a team of two who always worked together called Huntley/Muir, whilst the conductor was to be Richard Armstrong, who had been the long-standing music director of WNO before moving on to have the same position at Scottish Opera.

Six months prior to the first performances, WNO started their publicity campaign. One of the items included a visit to the very lake out of which the beautiful girl is supposed to have emerged. This lake is at Llyn-y-fan-fach, near to Myddfai. Max, David & I were driven there, and there was another vehicle coming along with us which contained the crew for making a video of Max and David talking by the side of the lake. It was perishingly cold. Max had on a hat, as he always did, but David stood there, answering questions about the opera without any covering for his head whatsoever. I watched the proceedings from the comfort of the warmth of the camera crew's vehicle. David later said that he had become really ill as a result of this expose to extreme cold. The atmosphere of menace was somehow present.

WNO has its base in Cardiff, and performs in two venues – in Llandudno which covers the north part of the principality, and in Cardiff itself which caters for the south part. For the rest of the time, the company goes on tour to various towns in England. This was the format which was used for The Doctor. There was an a preview in Cardiff on 5 July 1996, but the official first night was in Llandudno in north Wales on 10 July, and again three days later in the same town. That brought the season to an end. It re-started again three months later in October, taking the opera to Oxford, Birmingham, Southampton and Liverpool. I had been used to touring around with The Fires, but seeing this WNO operation on the road filled me with awe.

The response all round was medium. It certainly was not flop, but neither was it a whacking great success. Matthew returned to Llandudno for the premiere. I don't know if he was pleased with the outcome, but certainly Max was happy to repeat the formula of working with David Pountney again.

