

CARTE BLANCHE

Ahead of a new memoir, **James Jolly** speaks to the veteran director **Brian Large** about how you present concerts and opera for the small screen in a domestic setting



Directing the director – filming music

You may not immediately recognise the name Brian Large, but I'll guarantee you've seen his work. As one of the leading directors of filmed classical music for the last 50 years, his credits include the Boulez-Chéreau *Ring* from Bayreuth (as well as six other Wagner operas there), 19 New Year's Day Concerts from Vienna, 'Horowitz in Moscow', over 80 operas and galas from The Met, the 'real-time' *Tosca* from Rome, numerous operas from Covent Garden, La Scala, the Mariinsky and other major houses, not to mention the world premiere of Benjamin Britten's opera for television, *Owen Wingrave*.

Now, a youthful 80, Large – British, but since 1981 based between London, New York and Vienna – has been reliving his past for a memoir, *At Large*, due out this March. 'The decision to write a book came from Valerie Solti,' he tells me. 'She said she'd been wanting to get down further memories that hadn't made it into the biography of Georg, so I told her that if she did it, I'd write mine. Sadly, she passed away before she could write hers, but with the advent of Covid, I wanted a project that could perhaps exercise my mind and help me to go down memory lane. So, that's how it began.'

Rather like the Decca producer and later television executive John Culshaw – a friend and colleague of Large's, and whose CV has many similarities – Large wrote two books very early on, biographies of Bedřich Smetana and Bohuslav Martinů (Culshaw's was on Rachmaninov), so he knew the ropes. And, as conveyed in his book, his evident enthusiasm and charm opened doors back then, and clearly remained undimmed to greatly assist a career that brought him into close proximity with a lot of artists.

By his own admission, Large loved working in the opera house where his role was to direct a theatrical experience that had already, as it were, been directed. The French director Patrice Chéreau had been engaged by Bayreuth to take charge of the centenary production in 1976 of Wagner's *Ring* with his fellow countryman



Director Brian Large has told the story of his career

Pierre Boulez as conductor. It was one of those productions that has gone down in operatic history, both theatrically – for its powerful vision of the work seen through a prism of a plutocratic society at the time of the Industrial Revolution (so roughly contemporaneous with the work's composition), requiring of its cast a standard of acting that wasn't often seen in opera – and musically. Some have seen

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Brian Large

the production as the start of *Regietheater*, 'director's theatre'. Boulez's fleet, light textures and general transparency were also a novelty, and arguably even more radical than Chéreau's staging. Needless to say, it caused quite a storm when first unveiled.

Much of the production's international fame is due to Brian Large's powerful and sensitive filmed version, for which he had the rare luxury of a theatre without an audience. So, how do you direct another director's work? 'First of all, communication is most important,' he explains. 'Being able to sit down with a stage director and understanding what he wants, and for him to understand what

you are able to give him. It's a two-way thing. It should be a dialogue, so that whatever problems arise, you can try and find solutions. But it's always about sitting down, talking, giving the stage director the opportunity to see what you are doing in rehearsal, to be able to get his reaction. Maybe you have missed something. Maybe he has missed something – but it is a dialogue. It should be. (It is not always a dialogue, because some directors feel that they know better than a video director, and they don't need to talk to you. There have been occasions when that has happened.) But communication is the secret.'

What's fascinating is how much richer the operatic experience can be when the camera is there on stage, capturing an intimacy that might be missed from the back of the stalls, let alone the amphitheatre. 'Sometimes you come to the conclusion that you need to add something – because what's meant for the stage is maybe not meant for the screen. And that's when the dialogue gets interesting: "I'm not going to do this without talking to you. I want you to know why I want this shot here. And can you help me? Can you help me to achieve this shot? Can you move the two people in a different area? Can you make them closer together? I need to get a reaction." The director has created on stage something for an audience of 3000, but I need something to give to an audience of two or three at home. And, again, it's dialogue.'

With the *Ring*, thanks to the absence of the audience, Large was able to take his cameras onto the stage. 'The wonderful thing about Patrice was he could see angles and reactions in a way that he had not conceived before. He'd already directed some films, and he'd been involved in televising an opera – *Hoffmann*, I think – but he came with an open mind. There was no question about that. He knew that at that point in time, I'd actually made a considerable number of stage shows for the television from Covent Garden, from Scala, from Vienna. And perhaps he was aware that I was slightly ahead of him in that area. But again, it was about communication. It was a dialogue – and



Directing Verdi's *La traviata* with Anna Netrebko at the 2006 Salzburg Festival, Brian Large (centre) with the ORF team

it was a very, very healthy one too. Of course he saw everything, because after we had rehearsed – and there was a final dress rehearsal for television – he watched the dress rehearsal next to me, side by side, watching the monitor so he could see exactly what was coming from our discussion. And I think he approved!’

So much for the directors, but what about the singers? He tells a lovely story about working with Marilyn Horne on a Rossini production. ‘After the first rehearsal on tape, I invite the artist to come and sit with me, side by side, and watch the monitor without the stage director, but with his knowledge, and simply say as tactfully as I can “I think maybe it’s a little too broad. I think maybe you’re playing it to the back row of the gallery”, or as in the case with Marilyn Horne, when we were doing *Italiana*, when she didn’t see what I was trying to say. I told her, “You’re playing it like Ethel Merman. It’s too Broadway. Stop it!” And she looked at me and I thought she was going to hit me in the face. And she said, “No, let’s, let’s play it again ... and again.” And we played it three times and then she said, “I think you’re right. It’s too heavy. It’s not subtle. I’m playing it to the back row of the gallery.”’ Similarly, with Renata Scotto and her first *Bobème* in ’77 from the Met – which I didn’t direct. She hadn’t seen herself on screen before, as directors on previous occasions hadn’t shown her. When she saw herself, she was shocked. She realised she needed to become a more subtle actress and when we later worked together she was much more “camera-friendly”. And this is something I’ve done with Birgit Nilsson, with Renée Fleming,

with Gwyneth Jones, with all of them – “Please give me a half an hour of your time. Come and sit with me with the score, with your husband, with your wife, whatever. I don’t mind. Let’s talk and let’s look and be constructive. If there’s something you don’t like that I’m doing, tell me. I’m going to ask you to do this differently. Please consider it.” And it has worked. Out of all the hundreds of shows I’ve done, I’ve always used this technique. Plácido Domingo loved what the camera could do, and when occasionally he would have a difficulty – the tessitura maybe was a bit high or something – he would say, “Brian, just stand back a bit.” And the person who was always sensitive to this was Mirella Freni. She would always say, “Don’t forget, I’m a grandmother”, which was very sweet. She didn’t have to say anything else.’

Another artist who greatly benefited from Large’s sensitive eye was Carlos Kleiber, whom he captured at the helm of the Vienna Philharmonic on a couple of occasions (1989 and 1992). ‘Carlos was a very special case, there’s no question of that. He was very temperamental, very sensitive, highly nervous. But there was something about him which was of an extra dimension. I find it very hard to put into words. I knew him quite well, and I loved working with him. I loved the sensitivity, the grace, the almost balletic quality. And when I did the two New Year’s Day concerts with him – the only two he did – I wanted to express the balletic quality, the fact that it would be a waltz and he’d be waltzing. Or he was dancing to a polka. And the body suggested this. The arm movement, the sensitivity of the hands, the way he could float was something which I remarked on and talked to him about. And he said, “I trust you. Do

what you want. I’m not going to change anything. I am what I am. I cannot do it any other way.” So Large went for a camera set within the orchestra and on the floor, so it was looking up at him. ‘He was a very slim person, very thin and had wonderful facial structure. It was like a Greek statue in many ways. I loved the way he caressed the phrases in a balletic way. And the reason I put the camera down on the floor was to be able to accentuate this, to be able to focus more on the dance-like quality of his movements. It was the sense of dancing with

the music, which I wanted to capture. And I hope I succeeded.’

We ended by talking about a shot that has gone down in television history, and which still touches the heart. During Large’s film of Horowitz’s return to Moscow in 1986, as the great pianist plays Schumann’s *Träumerei* as an encore, the camera homes in on an elderly man as the tears stream down his cheek. Large elaborates. ‘Part of the art of being a director is to be able to have the ability to not just look at the screens in front of you. Most of the time I memorise the music because so many directors put their heads down and look at the score and don’t look at the monitor. So, I’m able to keep my head up to look at the screens, and part of the technique I’ve always developed is always to look not only at the screen you are transmitting, but to look at your preview. What is the next shot? And can you see if there is anything happening that you can incorporate on the spur of the moment. In Moscow, I had seven or eight cameras; because of the importance of the event, not only artistically but politically, one needed to have eyes everywhere, and a camera that was not going to be used for maybe three or four minutes, I would instruct, “Please look in the audience to see if there is anything that you can make me aware of.” And one very helpful and sensitive cameraman found this now famous individual who was so moved by the occasion, and by the music, that he was in tears. And I saw it, and it was a gift from heaven, and I punched it in. Yes, it’s something I’ve never regretted.’

‘At Large’ by Brian Large and Jane Scovell will be published by Verlag für moderne Kunst in March