

## The recording of *Fête Galante* and *Shakespeare's Garland*, Christmas offers, and much more!

*In this Newsletter, we report on the recording of Smyth's Fête Galante and Dibdin's Shakespeare's Garland, the International Gilbert and Sullivan Festival, and reviews of Raymond and Agnes and The Boatswain's Mate – as well as giving details of our special Christmas offers!*

### Recording *Fête Galante*

Valerie Langfield writes as follows: we recorded Smyth's enchanting opera in the first week of November, at St Mary's, Walthamstow, East London, an area with various renewal projects going on, so the atmosphere was very lively. It was very good to be back there again – this was where we recorded our very first CD, Smyth's *The Boatswain's Mate*. What a lot has happened in the meantime!



*St Mary's, Walthamstow*

The singers had rehearsed the week before, and orchestral rehearsals began on the Monday, at King's College London. The players were all members of the Lontano ensemble; some had also played in *The Boatswain's Mate*, and it was good to see them again. The day went very well, but what I found so interesting was how things changed once some of the singers came, in the latter part of the afternoon. We were very early aware of the delicacy and precision of Smyth's orchestral writing, but once the solo voices were added in, this added so much colour, texture and vibrancy.



*Rehearsing at King's College London. Standing, Felix Kemp (Pierrot) with Alessandro Fisher (Harlequin) and Carolyn Dobbin (the Queen) on his left*

Tuesday's rehearsals were at St Mary's, which provided an opportunity for Dave Rowell, our wonderful recording engineer, to come in

and begin to set up – we were on a very tight schedule, so it was helpful to begin the setting up before starting recording on Wednesday. Dave was our engineer for *Raymond and Agnes*, and for *Shakespeare's Garland* (see below). The chorus arrived in the afternoon – quite small, just eight voices, but again, adding so much to the whole opera.



*The chorus: ladies on the left, men on the right*

Recording began sharp at 10.30 on the Wednesday. I was really pleased that some of our subscribers could come and it was good to see them again. It took a while to get into a rhythm, but everything went according to schedule. The afternoon was mostly spent on the love duet between the Queen (Carolyn Dobbin, who sang Madelina in *Raymond and Agnes*) and the Lover (Mark Milhofer, who sang Raymond). Smyth kept some of her most beautiful music for this scene; it was exquisite. The two voices were exceptionally well matched, Mark's high, sweet timbre really well suited against Carolyn's richness; it was very special.



*The onstage band*

The last part of the afternoon was spent recording the little onstage band – concertina, banjo, piano, and piccolo. This was hilarious! It's very short, just a little cameo to paint a musical picture described in the libretto, and our players clearly relished it. Our other wonderful singers were Simon Wallfisch (the King), Felix Kemp (Pierrot), Charmian Bedford (Columbine) and Alessandro Fisher (Harlequin).

Thursday morning, the final session, was spent recording all the chorus. The chorus is a significant part of the opera, offering commentary on the action. There was a huge sense of relief when we finished and could send the orchestra home, but we continued a little longer to record the unaccompanied chorus item, the Madrigal. For the accompanied choruses, we also had some extra string players, to balance the singers better. It would have sounded rather thin otherwise, but the few extra players made an enormous difference to the sound.



*The orchestra with the extra players*

We had excellent help from the people at the church, especially at the start of the week. Our stage manager at St Mary's, Magdalena Carbow, worked tirelessly to make sure there was plenty of hot water for tea and coffee – and that enough packets of biscuits were open! – and also to clear the body of the church each day, as it was in use in the evenings and early mornings.

There were some ‘interesting’ moments – at one point on the Thursday morning, I was aware of some odd and intrusive noises outside, and investigated only to discover a man delivering corrugated iron sheets, which he carried from his lorry and dropped on to the ground. He was certain it couldn’t be done quietly, but I managed to persuade him to put a corner down first – with my help – and then gently lay down the rest of the sheets. During recording sessions, we locked the door to prevent public access, but during the break, we did occasionally have people wandering in off the street!



*Alessandro Fisher (Harlequin), Charmian Bedford (Columbine), and Carolyn Dobbin (the Queen)*

Projects such as this, involving a large number of people – 32 performers, plus Odaline de la Martinez and support people – require a great deal of organisation, as you can appreciate. Everyone worked really hard to make it a success. We only had three recording sessions, and with the various changes of personnel – chorus, extra strings, the onstage band – there was a lot of re-balancing to do, so we had to work very hard and get things right very quickly. Odaline (always known as Chachi) was her usual ebullient self, making sure every detail was in place. She was very, very happy with the result!

I’ve been doing some work editing parts of *The Boatswain’s Mate* for full orchestra, and it’s made me aware that Smyth didn’t just reduce the orchestration for the ‘popular’

version, as she called it: she re-thought it so that it was properly balanced and suitable for the smaller forces. It seemed to me that she had done the same with *Fête Galante*. The detail and care that she’d put into were brilliant. Coupled with some of her finest music, this is a sparkling, scintillating work.



*Gillian McDonagh, our wonderful percussionist. Yes, she really is playing timpani and tambourine at the same time!*

The recording lasts around 45 minutes, and we’re filling the CD with a transfer of Sir Adrian Boult’s recording of the ‘Minuet’ from *Fête Galante*, and the ‘Two Interlinked French Melodies’ from *Entente Cordiale*, another of Smyth’s operas. We’d love to record that too, but the full score has disappeared. That still leaves us with a little space on the CD: we’ve got some ideas for that, but you’ll have to wait a little to find out what we have in mind!

Thanks to everyone who has contributed to this project – we now move into the next stages, and we’re still very glad of further contributions to help with the costs of editing and the CD production!

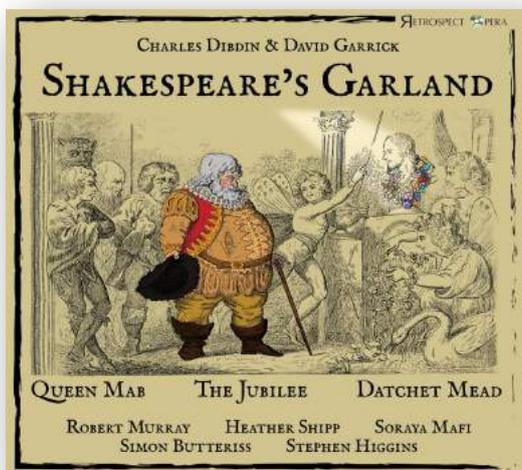
### **Recording Dibdin’s *Shakespeare’s Garland***

*Andy H. King writes as follows:* Retrospect Opera enjoyed a splendid week in Tunbridge

Wells, recording a second disc of Charles Dibdin's music, this time bringing together three neglected gems: *The Jubilee*, *Queen Mab*, and *Datchet Mead*. The latter two are given complete, while David Chandler and Simon Butteriss established an abridged version of *The Jubilee* libretto suitable for recording, brilliantly retaining all of Dibdin's shining wit. Meanwhile, I set to work on editing and typesetting the music from contemporary sources preparing new performing editions especially for this recording.

The cast were assembled and directed by Simon, and we were very fortunate in engaging three extraordinary artists who could also act, to complete the quartet of soloists: Rob Murray, Heather Shipp, and Soraya Mafi. The opportunity to record in the beautiful surroundings of The Richard Burnett Heritage Collection with an ensemble of specialist Baroque instrumentalists was a real honour, and Retrospect Opera are thrilled to hold the distinction of being the first company to record in their new premises.

Stephen Higgins directed the musicians from a piano akin to the kind Dibdin himself would have played, and crafted insightful realisations of the figured bass (a Baroque system of accompaniment using numbers to indicate appropriate harmony, based on the bass line).



*A preview of the album cover of Shakespeare's Garland*

Recording Engineer Dave Rowell was his usual unflappable self – calm, knowledgeable, and patient, he was sensitive to the needs of the artists and the music. I chipped in occasionally on matters of appropriate Baroque performance practice and interpretation, but for the most part I was able to relax, confident in the knowledge that the assembled artists were bringing to Dibdin every ounce of enthusiasm and dedication he deserves. The result is a bright and charming disc that we are confident you will enjoy, as well as a valuable addition to the wider understanding of Dibdin.

## Christmas Offers

Once again Christmas is getting close! And we reckon our recording of Charles Dibdin's *Christmas Gambols* makes a perfect Christmas gift for music lovers, or for anyone fascinated by Jane Austen's England (Dibdin, remember, is the best represented composer in Austen's music collection). To encourage its use as a seasonal gift, we're now reopening our special seasonal offer from last year: buy two and get one free! This will run until 25 December. Anyone can take advantage of this, so please tell your friends who may not be Retrospect Opera supporters – but to take advantage of the offer they must order direct from us.

For anyone who has made a donation of £25 or more to any of our projects, this offer is particularly advantageous, since you can claim the special supporter's price AND the 3-for-2 offer! **So that's just £17.90 for 3 CDs, post free in the UK!** Do consider whose Christmas you can brighten up with a fun-filled Dibdin CD.

## Christmas Gifts

For some time, we've been advertising the fact that if you introduce us to a new supporter who donates £50 or more to any of our projects, you can get a free copy of one of our single CD releases as a thank you gift. Between now and Christmas we are going to

extend that offer further: if you introduce us to a new supporter who donates £50 or more, you can claim a free CD and so can they! So please consider which of your friends and colleagues might be interested in joining the Retrospect Opera family.

It has come to our attention that substantial excerpts from one of our recordings have recently appeared on an Internet streaming site.

If you come across any instances of Retrospect recordings appearing online other than on our website, we would greatly appreciate it if you could let us know so that we can investigate and take action as appropriate.



Valerie looking after Retrospect Opera's stall at the Gilbert and Sullivan Festival (photo by Roger W. Turner)

## The International Gilbert and Sullivan Festival

On 18 August, Valerie and David held a stall at the G&S Memorabilia Fair at Harrogate. When we were last there, in 2016, we had just one CD to display: *The Boatswain's Mate*. This year we had five, and it was very satisfying to reflect on how we have been able to build up something of a catalogue in the intervening two years. We sold nearly £400 worth of CDs, and met dozens of very nice people, some of whom have now become Retrospect Opera supporters!

For anyone interested in Gilbert and Sullivan, we recommend the Harrogate Festival with great enthusiasm. It's a wonderful gathering of devotees from all over the world, and offers opportunities to see things that you simply can't see anywhere else, like this year's production of Sullivan's beautiful *Haddon Hall* (reviewed by David here: [www.operatoday.com/content/2018/09/a\\_landmark\\_revi.php](http://www.operatoday.com/content/2018/09/a_landmark_revi.php)).

## Reviews of *Raymond and Agnes*

In our last Newsletter, we reported on our latest release, *Raymond and Agnes*. We are delighted that this release was Opera magazine's **Disc of the Month** in October 2018 and that it has also enjoyed some great reviews:

*"[Richard Bonynges] stylistic sense in Romantic British opera is impeccable [...] the Royal Ballet Sinfonia is awake to the nuances of Loder's orchestration. The 24-strong chorus is exceptionally good, offering fresh-toned singing matched by clear diction. Of the principals, I was most taken with Mark Milhofer's sweetly personal Raymond [...] [Majella Cullagh's] unmistakable timbre remains attractive as always. [...] [Andrew Greenan has] vivid sense of character and commanding presence. The tricky, pivotal role of the heroine's friend [...] is honourably dispatched by Carolyn Dobbin, and Alessandro Fisher is first-rate [...] Quentin Hayes is the baritone bandit whose air of relaxed irony adds to the pleasures of the last scenes. We're used to quality documentation from Retrospect [Opera], but here they excel themselves with brightly informative booklet essays [...] as well as a complete libretto, tracked synopsis and evocative illustrations. An overdue reparation to its forgotten composer, this lovingly-crafted recording is*

*also a major milestone for 19th-century British opera."*

– Christopher Webber, *Opera magazine*,  
October 2018

*"The actual performance is all that can be desired. It is a model of how an opera can be repristinated. The singing is superb from the first note to the last. The dialogue is convincingly enunciated and is essential to the progress of the plot. The orchestral playing is ideal, revealing a 'forgotten' composer who was clearly a master of his instrumental forces. [...] Loder's music is often more melodramatic and musically powerful than much of Sullivan's. [...] The liner notes are a model of clarity and interest for an opera recording. [...] They provide a model for future discussions of 'forgotten' operas. [...] The entire libretto is presented, and this includes the spoken dialogue. This is keyed into the CD tracks for ease of reference. [...] Based on this present recording, it would be an ideal next step to move from the recording studio to the opera house.*

*I believe that it would make a stunning addition to the repertoire of one of the great opera companies."*

– John France, *MusicWeb International*,  
August 2018

[http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2018/Aug/Loder Raymond RO005.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2018/Aug/Loder_Raymond_RO005.htm)

*"This new recording of Edward Loder's Raymond and Agnes is based on an admirable new edition of the score by Valerie Langfield [...] The admirable CD booklet discusses the work's influences [...] As Raymond, Mark Milhofer sings with a lovely fluidity and nice sense of line which is very necessary in this music. There is charm too, and he makes Raymond seem interesting and not the usual drip. As his beloved Agnes, Majella Cullagh is on fine form technically in the elaborations in Agnes' vocal lines [...] she makes Agnes, who is admittedly a rather passive character, more interesting than she might otherwise be. Andrew Greenan has great fun as the Baron*

*[...] Greenan sings with a lovely swagger and a nice musicality [...] The smaller parts are all admirably cast, and create a very strong ensemble indeed. Carolyn Dobbin as Madelina, Agnes's foster-sister, takes fine advantage of her solo moments, whilst Alessandro Fisher is full of charm as Raymond's valet. Quentin Hayes makes what he can of the small but crucial role of Antoni the bandit. Richard Bonyngé conducts the Royal Ballet Sinfonia with real sympathy, bringing out the melodic charm of the music and engaging us from beginning to end. [...] This new recording should bring the opera a lot of new followers, and hopefully, stimulate interest."*

– Robert Hugill, *Planet Hugill*, August 2018

<http://www.planethugill.com/2018/08/a-real-discovery-loders-english.html>

*"The latest treat issued by Retrospect Opera is an extremely entertaining rarity. [...] Performances are superb. The Royal Ballet Sinfonia under the direction of [Richard] Bonyngé perfectly captures the drama underlying the sung text at all times and navigates the occasional virtuosic passage with great aplomb. Mark Milhofer's Raymond is remarkable: his are difficult vocal passages that, for the most part, lie extremely high vocally and Milhofer's lightness of tone and superb enunciation make for a great listen. Majella Cullagh's Agnes features some similarly fiendish passages including bel-canto writing, which lean towards coloratura in places [...] I loved what Andrew Greenan achieves in revealing the complexities of his character of the Baron through a nuanced vocal performance – this is a singing actor of very high quality. [...] The performances are every bit as carefully characterised by Caroline Dobbin, Alessandro Fisher and Alexander Robin Baker to say nothing of extremely well sung – there is scarcely any let up in the virtuosity [...] and these singers shine as much as the titular characters. Also superb is the bandit Antoni played by Quentin Hayes (arguably a more villainous character than the Baron) who achieves the threatening attitude of the character in every bar he sings. [...] Kudos indeed to recording*

engineer Dave Rowell as well as all others who worked on and edited this superb CD. Thanks also to the compilers of the substantial CD booklet which contains a full libretto and in-depth liner notes – an essential component to every Retrospect package is the wealth of information available in their booklets [...] Another all round must-have package from a company to whom the world of English opera is becoming ever more indebted.”

– Dan Adams, *Light Music Society*, Autumn 2018

“Retrospect Opera have done us all a service with this recording [...] Loder [...] at his best is a very good dramatic composer indeed.”

– Robert Beale, *Manchester Classical Music*, August 2018

<https://manchesterclassicalmusic.blogspot.com/2018/08/review-of-retrospect-operas-recording.html>

If anyone who received a copy of our re-release of *The Wreckers* has noticed that the booklet was damaged in transit, please let us know – we have replacements that we can send you.

Also, if anyone has found that their CD2 of *Raymond and Agnes* doesn't play properly (apparently this happens with some CD players), we've learned that this is to do with tolerances. We've had some new CDs produced – please let us know if this is a problem for you and we'll replace it.

### Review of *The Boatswain's Mate*

Even our debut disc continues to prompt favourable reviews. It was recently reviewed again by MusicWeb International (who originally reviewed the recording in 2016):

“This is my first encounter with Retrospect Opera. They're a small organization who devote themselves “to researching and

recording 18th, 19th and early 20th century operas and related dramatic musical works by British composers”. It's highly commendable that they're prepared to mine this rich heritage of dramatic musical gems, much of it sadly faded into the mists of time. [...] I'm impressed by the fine singers that have been amassed for this latest recording – Nadine Benjamin (*Mrs Waters*), Edward Lee (*Harry Benn*), Jeremy Huw Williams (*Ned Travers*), Simon Wilding (*Policeman*). Equally gratifying is the intimate atmosphere generated by the Lontano Ensemble, a chamber group consisting of wind quintet, percussion, and single strings. St. Mary's Church, Walthamstow, London provides a sympathetic acoustic, ideal for a group such as this, as it allows the detail of Smyth's ingenious and colourful scoring to emerge with vibrant clarity. I also love the way the engineers have balanced the singers and instrumentalists in the mix. This lovely production is bolstered by some well-written notes by Christopher Wiley and the inclusion of a full libretto.”

– Stephen Greenbank, *MusicWeb International*, August 2018

[http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2018/Aug/Smyth\\_boatswain\\_RO001.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2018/Aug/Smyth_boatswain_RO001.htm)

We are very sorry to announce the death of the wonderful soprano Sally Silver. Sally was to have sung the role of Agnes in *Raymond and Agnes*, but knowing she was ill, and fearing she might let us down when it could be too difficult to replace her, chose to step down while we still had time. She was instrumental in helping make the recording possible, with advice and very practical help. We miss her warm, generous personality and her beautiful voice.

### David Chandler in *History Today*

David has contributed the lead article in the December 2018 issue of *History Today*, 'Christmas before Dickens'. David's article

discusses Charles Dibdin's *Christmas Gambols* and the full picture it presents of the festivities that constituted a quintessentially British Christmas prior to the Victorian resurgence.

David has also written an article for Opera Today entitled 'Beyond Gilbert and Sullivan: Edward Loder's *Raymond and Agnes* and the Apotheosis of English Romantic Opera', which may be viewed at their website here:

[http://www.operatoday.com/content/2018/07/beyond\\_gilbert.php](http://www.operatoday.com/content/2018/07/beyond_gilbert.php)

As you can imagine, it is a difficult time for the classical music industry and we are sorry to report that our distributor, Discovery, has gone into administration. The good news is that we are switching to a new distributor some time in January.

### Ethel Smyth performances

Smyth has continued to be celebrated in a range of high-profile performances this year. Her Overture to *The Boatswain's Mate* was performed at the BBC Proms at Alexandra Palace by the BBC Concert Orchestra in September – and it was thanks to our recording that they were able to source a set of parts!

Smyth's *The Wreckers* was given a superb production – the first in the UK for over a decade – at Stowe, Buckinghamshire in October by Arcadian Opera. Justin Lavender, who sang the leading role of Mark in the opera's 1994 recording reissued by Retrospect Opera earlier in the year, was its musical director and conductor.

The show *Ethel Smyth: Grasp the Nettle*, performed by Lucy Stevens (contralto) and Elizabeth Marcus (piano), about which we reported in the last Newsletter, was given a very special performance last month before an invited audience in the Speaker's House at the House of Commons, hosted by the Opera All-Party Parliamentary Group.

In addition, Smyth's Mass in D has been presented twice in London this month, at Southwark Cathedral by the London Oriana Choir and at The Barbican by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. Our own Chris Wiley gave a pre-performance talk at the former and wrote the programme notes for the latter.

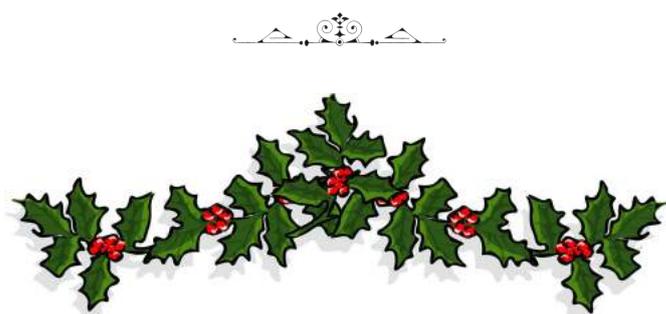
### Nadine Benjamin

Finally, many congratulations to Nadine Benjamin, who sang the role of Mrs Waters on our debut recording of Smyth's *The Boatswain's Mate*, and who has been performing as Clara in ENO's sold-out production of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

Nadine also delivered an excellent performance of 'Summertime' live on *The Andrew Marr Show* earlier in the month, accompanied by ENO's Head of Music, Martin Fitzpatrick. The recording is available via the BBC iPlayer (watch from 56.15):

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b0brjvl5/the-andrew-marr-show-04112018>

Nadine is now to take up the role of Musetta in ENO's production of *La Bohème*.



*With very best wishes for the festive season and 2019, and as ever, our thanks from the team at Retrospect Opera for your continued support:*

*David, Valerie, Andy and Chris*