

RETROSPECT PERA

Solomon & Burnand *Pickwick*

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Valerie Langfield reports back on the successful recording sessions



The National Opera Studio, Wandsworth

The National Opera Studio was established by the Arts Council and is part-funded by the UK's major opera companies. It is a training ground for opera singers and répétiteurs at the highest level, and has nurtured many artists who have subsequently enjoyed successful international careers. Wandsworth has been its base of operations since 2003.



The neighbouring architecture

Wandsworth is a vibrant and cosmopolitan area of south London – the high road has expensive supermarkets and gym clubs cheek by jowl with distinctly local shops, together with a great number of cafes and restaurants, offering a great range of cuisines. The National Opera Studio, where we recorded *Pickwick* and *Cups and Saucers*, lies behind some of them, in a former chapel, with a very eminent history, dating back to Huguenot times. It's surrounded largely by Victorian houses, small and somewhat cramped – some of them distinctly Dickensian. There's modern architecture too, so there's something for everyone.



The plaque on the front wall of the chapel

We were booked to record on Monday and Tuesday, 12th and 13th September. I was there early, and so was Emma, our stage manager. John, our recording engineer, soon turned up and so did Francesco the piano tuner, and the first hour and a half was spent getting the piano tuned (a Yamaha S6) and the equipment set up. Simon then arrived and so did Stephen Higgins, who would be directing from the keyboard. The staff were brilliant – most interested in what we were doing, and incredibly helpful, especially Remon the caretaker. They were very keen to ensure that we had all we needed, and we were very glad of the lift to get the equipment up to the first floor – it was a funny little thing, just a platform within the lined lift shaft, and a control panel, so you had to keep everything clear of the sides.



Francesco de Maio tuning the piano

Simon had reported that rehearsals had gone well – these were held in the English National Opera rehearsal studios in Hampstead, north London – so everyone was ready to go. We didn't record *Pickwick* in order – we began with some bits for Simon, and once Gaynor arrived, moved on to some of her and Simon's duets. Alessandro, our lovely treble, singing the part of Mrs Bardell's son, arrived, and we moved on to their ensembles, and then, with Toby's arrival, to the full ensembles. Before we knew it, Alessandro and then Toby had recorded all their sections. We had some technical issues which meant we fell behind, but by the end of the day, we had pulled the time back. It was a long day, finishing mid-evening, but we'd broken the back of it, which was a relief to us all. It was a tight schedule, to keep costs down; but for noise reasons, we'd paid an extra fee to ensure no-one else would be using the building, though we were occasionally aware of external sounds such as an aeroplane going overhead, which meant we would wait before doing a take.



Gaynor Keeble, Simon Butteriss and Alessandro MacKinnon

Note: for Child Protection reasons, please do not extract and recirculate the above image. Thank you.

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<http://www.retrospectopera.org.uk/Donate.html>



Simon Butteriss (left) and Toby Stafford Allen

We started promptly on the Tuesday. Once we'd finished *Pickwick*, we moved straight on to *Cups and Saucers*. This proved surprisingly tricky – the dialogue is very detailed, and of course crucial. Simon was keen to ensure it was just right – and so it was. It was fascinating to see how he brought out the wit in both pieces, through timing and tone of voice, and how skilfully he directed the others to match and balance what he was doing. We did the domestic – piano only – version of *Cups and Saucers* but it was originally accompanied by an orchestra, and some instrumental cues were marked in the vocal score; in Mrs Worcester's first song 'My Little Saucer', flute cues were given, but it was impossible for one person to play all the notes – the flute cues added a lovely gentle flourish but required a second player, so I played those, while Stephen played the rest.



Stephen Higgins and Valerie Langfield

I was delighted to be of even more use when it came to the chinking duet. So that Gaynor could concentrate on her part, I played the cup and saucer. The cup has to be chinked in time with the music and I'd brought a little porcelain sugar bowl that had belonged to my grandmother, and produces a rather sweet tone. Just for the record, it was a piece of Thun, Bohemia, porcelain; I've not been able to establish its date. The saucer was much more modern, produced for a stamp fair(!) in Prague in 1962 and marked Karlovarsky porcelain. It was entirely coincidental that both pieces were Czechoslovakian, though – the pieces were chosen solely for their musical qualities. We're wondering whether to credit them in the CD booklet!



Valerie Langfield, Gaynor Keeble and Simon Butteriss

Much easier is the credit to Emma Harding, our stage manager. A stage manager is an unsung heroine – seeing what needs doing, and quietly doing it without fuss, and very efficiently. Emma, as well as sorting everything else out that needed sorting out, demonstrated her versatility by page-turning for Stephen when necessary, to ensure quiet page-turns.



Stephen Higgins and Emma Harding

We worked right up to the 4.30 deadline – we had to be out by 5.30, as that was what was booked, and John, our engineer, needed an hour to pack everything down. Some of you may recognise John as the engineer for the *Boatswain's Mate* recording – he did a fantastic job on that recording we were really pleased that he was able to be our engineer for *Pickwick* too.

But then the timing went to pieces. I put some of the kit in the lift – you may recall that I said it was a funny little lift, and it decided it would have the last laugh – I pressed the button, and eighteen inches later it stopped. I was stuck in it for an hour, and it took four men to work out how to get the door open so I could climb out (after first lifting out all the recording equipment – that was much more important!). Fortunately, I'm not claustrophobic, and my train was not for some time. I must pay full credit to the staff at the Studio – they stayed in contact with me throughout, so that I always knew as much as they did, and consequently I never felt isolated. I believe the lift has still not been fixed!



Cups and Saucers

An enormous amount of planning goes into such projects, from the initial notion that this is a piece worth doing, to realising that *Pickwick* alone would not adequately fill the CD, to asking Simon Butteriss if he had any suggestions for filling it. I'd thought of songs by Edward Solomon, which would certainly be worth doing some time, but Simon came up instantly with the suggestion of George Grossmith's very popular curtain-raiser *Cups and Saucers*. Simon is an expert on Grossmith – he has presented a series of programmes on the artist for BBC Radio 3 (they were absolutely fascinating) – and of course is renowned as specialising in the comic baritone rôles of Gilbert and Sullivan. He had found a copy of the score for *Cups and*

Saucers in a sale from a library (coincidentally, from my local library in Stockport, UK) – he paid the princely sum of 20p for it! Simon’s sense of comic timing is impeccable, and he has directed the performers with panache, enormous skill and ribald humour throughout. It has been an education and great joy to watch him in action. But everyone has – literally! – played their part. Stephen has quietly provided full music guidance; he is a superb, sensitive accompanist.



John Taylor (front) in the recording studio with Valerie, Gaynor and Simon

Now we move on to the editing. We are not going to make any attempt to get this out for Christmas – it’s just too tight. We’d have to get everything ready so far in advance, to take account of postal delays coming up to Christmas, and the pressure on the CD replicating firm, not to mention getting the editing just right, that it’s better to wait a bit, and do it properly. The reaction to doing it this way for *The Boatswain’s Mate* tells us that this is the right way to go.

We would be very grateful if you could contact your favourite radio station(s) to ask them to play a track or two from our recently released recording of *The Boatswain’s Mate*!

It’s important to emphasise that you’d like to hear something from the **new complete recording**, to avoid the chance of their broadcasting something different instead.

We will gladly send them a copy of the CD – just let us know the details.

Our recording of *The Boatswain’s Mate* has received great reviews, including the following:

The recording quality of the of the music is ideal. The clarity of the singing is never in doubt. [...] As a package this is exceptional. It is exactly how ‘revived’ operas should be presented.

(John France, MusicWeb International)

Lontano plays [...] with pristine point and elegance [...] Nadine Benjamin’s creamy lyric soprano hits her musical marks [...] three authoritative essays, a complete libretto and high production values all round, enhances an auspicious debut.

(Christopher Webber, *Opera*)

Our CD was also made *Opera* magazine’s **Disc of the Month**, and received a favourable mention in *BBC Music Magazine*.

We put a great deal of effort into good presentation for *The Boatswain’s Mate* – the music deserves nothing less, and we’re doing the same for *Pickwick*. We’re already working on the cover for the CD, with our wonderful designer, Leigh-Anne Patsais, who has come up with some brilliant designs, incorporating the Waltz cover that we included in our last newsletter.



Stephen Higgins directing from the piano



With thanks from the team at Retrospect Opera:

David, Valerie, Andy and Chris