

LIONEL FRIEND



Thoughts from the Podium - May 2012 Lionel Friend, conductor

IN RECENT MONTHS I have been spending a lot of time with 20th-century works and even newer! I had dared to programme a very challenging collection of pieces with students at the Birmingham Conservatoire in November, and they put their most concentrated efforts into a splendid evening. We were honoured to have **Elena Firsova** with us and played her beautiful essay for chamber ensemble, *Music for 12*.

All the preposterous hassle of persuading the US authorities to issue me with a work visa went out of my mind the moment I began rehearsing with the fabulous student orchestra at the **University of Southern California**. We premiered a short but thrilling orchestral work by **Frederick Lesemann**, and a brilliantly gifted piano student played **Gershwin's** wonderful Piano Concerto - not a work I had previously known, it's truly impressive! And we finished with the virtuosic display of Tchaikovsky's *Capriccio Italien*.

After another absorbing week at Birmingham Conservatoire recording Britten snippets for the online catalogue of his works, I was again at London's Wigmore Hall with the **Nash Ensemble** for a concert that included music by the Manchester trio: **Alexander Goehr**, **Peter Maxwell Davies** and **Harrison Birtwistle** (a first performance), who rarely get together these days. In addition there were beautiful pieces by Jonathan Harvey and Colin Matthews. Such programmes of demanding contemporary music are stimulating and very rewarding. The BBC will be broadcasting the evening quite soon, I believe.

AND NOW I AM CONCENTRATING on three operas that are quite new to me. In May the Royal

Academy of Music will present the London premiere of **Jonathan Dove's** *Mansfield Park*, a delightful conversation piece based on Jane Austen's famous novel. The Academy students are truly gifted, and it's fun to work with them.

In September (if the disruption of the Olympics allows us to rehearse!) the second opera of British Youth Opera's season will be **Judith Weir's** highly original and entertaining *A Night at the Chinese Opera*. The cast and orchestra will be young professionals, an exciting sphere of work for me.

FOR SOME TIME I have been preparing **Penderecki's** *The Devils of Loudun* for a new production in Copenhagen by Keith Warner that will open in February 2013. There are plans to bring this production to the UK later in the year before it transfers in October to the Polish National Opera in Warsaw as part of the composer's 80th birthday celebrations. It is a great classic work of the 1960s avant-garde. Brutally, aggressively uncompromising in its treatment of an uncomfortable topic - some nuns in a 16th-century French convent are possessed by devils, the local priest is accused of witchcraft and condemned to burn at the stake - its portrayal of Catholic tyranny was for the composer



a metaphor for Communist dictatorship in his native Poland. Powerful stuff! Penderecki is revising his score for our production and creating some additional scenes; I am thrilled to be part of this gripping project.

PERHAPS THE MOST HEADY PROSPECT in my calendar is that of giving **the first performance of a work by Benjamin Britten**, and in his centenary

year. One of the many remarkable works from which we recorded passages in February with Birmingham Conservatoire students is a tone poem for a large orchestra called *Chaos and Cosmos* that he composed at the age of 13. We are hoping to give the world premiere at a concert of English music in Birmingham Town Hall in June 2013.

LF

Upcoming projects

May 17 & 18, 2012

Royal Academy of Music, London
London premiere of Jonathan Dove's *Mansfield Park*

September 12 & 15, 2012

Peacock Theatre, London; British Youth Opera
A Night at the Chinese Opera (Judith Weir)

October 17, 2012

Wagner Society, London
an evening with Simon O'Neill

October 19, 2012

Birmingham Conservatoire SO
Wagner, Nielsen, Berlioz

October 20, 2012

Chetham's School, Manchester
adjudicate Delius Prize

November 19

St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh
accompany Wagner recital by Sir John Tomlinson

February 12, 14 & 27, March 5, 12, 19, 24 & 26, 2013

Royal Danish Opera, Copenhagen
The Devils of Loudun (Penderecki)

June 21, 2013

Birmingham Conservatoire SO, Birmingham Town Hall
Britten *Chaos and Cosmos* (1927)(premiere); Delius *Sea Drift*

October 2, 2013 (and other dates to be confirmed)

Polish National Opera, Warsaw
The Devils of Loudun (Penderecki)

May 31 - June 16, 2014

Royal Danish Opera, Copenhagen
Parsifal



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