

# Mark Wigglesworth: The man trying to rescue ENO

Mark Wigglesworth can be pleased that his tenure as music director at English National Opera is already going better than did his previous stab at running an opera company. Then again, after an orchestra revolt, that appointment — at La Monnaie opera in Brussels — finished before it even began. So at least Wigglesworth has his feet under the table at the Coliseum. The 51-year-old is conducting four operas at ENO during 2015-16 — the first, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, opens the season on Saturday. However, in the time between his appointment as successor to Edward Gardner and his arrival at the company, ENO hired and then lost a chief executive, Henriette Götz. Its chairman, Martyn Rose, privately called for the departure of the company's artistic director, John Berry. The letter was leaked and it was Rose who ended up falling on his sword when the board wouldn't back him. After mounting criticism, Berry, too, stepped down at the end of the last season.

And all this while the company still labours under a cut in its grant from the Arts Council. Isn't Wigglesworth stepping into chaos? "It's our job to make the outside world realise what it looks like from the inside — because we don't think it is chaos at all," he replies evenly as we sit in one the Coliseum private entertainment rooms. "I mean, had I joined last year when all this was blowing up, that would have actually been very challenging. My sense is that we are all going to inhale a breath of fresh air in order to move forward."

This week the company has made some announcements to steady the ship. Harry Brünjes, formerly deputy chairman and a defender of Berry during his power struggle with Rose, has been appointed chairman. Cressida Pollock, a 33-year-old McKinsey consultant originally hired as interim chief executive, has been confirmed in the position on a three-year

fixed contract.

To call these two a breath of fresh air is stretching your definition of cool breezes, but Wigglesworth argues that the company needs stability to work out what sort of long-term management structure it really needs before a replacement for Berry is found. “But at the moment there is no rush to tick a box.”

Could that mean hiring a director of productions who would also be an opera director — like Kasper Holten at the Royal Opera or David Pountney at Welsh National? “We haven’t ruled anything out,” Wigglesworth says, “but we’re also very conscious of having the privilege of having this building. The vision of the building is as important as the artistic vision for the company, so there might be a role for somebody who is excited by that.”

Wigglesworth says he’s enthused by the pending renovation of the Coliseum’s foyer, which is intended to make the space more welcoming to the public during the day “so that you’ll know you’re in an opera house and want to hang around for a while”. It will also raise more cash from a new restaurant that will be open throughout the day.

The other significant announcement this week scattered some stardust on the season: in April Glenn Close will make her West End debut as Norma Desmond in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Sunset Boulevard*, the second partnership between ENO and Michael Grade and Michael Linnit’s production company, GradeLinnit.

The semi-staged production follows *Sweeney Todd* last year with Bryn Terfel (and has the same director, Lonny Price) but there will be many more performances: 43 for *Sunset Boulevard* instead of 14 for *Sweeney Todd*. The losers will not be opera fans but balletomanes because the expanded performance run comes at the expense of the dance companies who normally hire the Coliseum in the spring. No doubt *Sunset Boulevard* will put some welcome numbers on to

ENO's balance sheet (although the company takes only a share of the profits; the exact split between ENO and GradeLinnit has not been disclosed).

Yet if Norma Desmond is ready for her close-up, is ENO? The company's critics argue that Berry's artistic achievements came at the cost of steadily reducing performances and poor box office figures. Much-trumpeted statistics are given about new audiences, but these don't seem to translate to regular bums on seats; core audiences, meanwhile, have been put off either by high prices (often later discounted) or by radical productions that haven't appealed to them.

Wigglesworth says he wants to return to the mission of the founder of ENO, Lilian Baylis, who established the Vic-Wells company in the 1930s. "Her philosophy was that opera should be of the highest quality and accessible to the most number of people. Frankly, engaging in one of those agendas is not acceptable. If you believe that the best work is not actually for 2,400 people a night, then you're in the wrong place." Can ENO really bring in the masses, as Baylis wanted, and pack 'em in for the opera as well as for Lloyd Webber? "If you get the work right and you get your promoting of it right, then filling this building shouldn't be a problem, but I completely agree that we have lost our way a little bit — in terms of people coming, frankly. You can't deny that the work is good and you can't deny that the box office has become more challenging. And that's not a price worth paying."

Is the box office doing healthy business for Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, not usually a crowd-pleaser? "I don't know . . . I'm told it is," Wigglesworth replies. I later check the website and the theatre is groaning with empty seats, especially midweek.

Wigglesworth may still be at the drawing board when it comes to concrete proposals for audience-building, but he has hit the ground running. Unlike Gardner, he says he will be a hands-on music director, more involved in planning productions and overseeing shows, even if he isn't conducting them.

A revival of Jonathan Miller's production of *The Barber of Seville* opens shortly after *Lady Macbeth* "and I've been to two rehearsals, and once it comes to the theatre I'll be at all of them. I'm not here to conduct specific titles but to be part of a team that does good work."

He defends Berry's habit of inviting opera virgins to direct new productions — leaving a mixed record in terms of critical success. "John was criticised for using 'non-opera directors'. Well, I think there are good opera directors and bad opera directors, and they come from all sorts of places."

I wonder if, before he arrived at ENO, Wigglesworth asked one of the company's most admired music directors, Mark Elder, for advice (as Gardner often did, especially early on). He politely reminds me that he is the oldest music director that ENO has had at the point of starting. "And I've worked with this company as a conductor for 15 years, and in some payroll sense ever since 1982 [as an usher while a student]. I'm not saying I know what to do already, but it's in my blood, this place, and every time I walk here I feel sort of at home." Wigglesworth's progress to one of the plum jobs in British classical music has had its ups and downs, however. Fresh out of the Royal Academy in 1989, the Sussex-born maestro won the prestigious Kondrashin Conducting Competition, prompting a mass round of "next Simon Rattle" epithets in the press, then disappointment from the same quarters when initially his career didn't go supernova. "The classical world suffers from its need to create individuals," he says. "And I can completely understand why — because audiences find an orchestra, or even an opera house, hard to relate to on a personal level. But it becomes a problem if that individual becomes bigger than the experience."

He was music director of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales from 1996 to 2000 but later fell out with the players of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Of the aborted Belgian appointment, he told me shortly afterwards that "an obvious lesson is to ask a few more questions before you go — and perhaps not necessarily believe the answers".

After *Lady Macbeth Wigglesworth* tackles Verdi's *The Force of Destiny*. He gets lighter relief when he conducts Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, a revival of a Simon McBurney production that received lukewarm reviews when unveiled two years ago. "I'm very conscious of that, but the real reason I wanted to do it is that the orchestra are raised up [on stage] and are very much part of the production. I really wanted to be part of that." After that, more Slavic tragedy in Janáček's *Jenufa*, which follows Wigglesworth's last acclaimed Janáček at ENO, *Katya Kabanova* in 2010.

In the meantime, though, it's all about 1930s adultery, murder and retribution in the livid colours and explosive climaxes of *Lady Macbeth*. Again, Wigglesworth has experience here: not only has he recorded all Shostakovich's symphonies, but he conducted this opera at ENO in 2001 to huge acclaim. "That production was very strong on satire, this production [by Dmitri Tcherniakov] goes more for the tragedy. It couldn't be more different, but it's equally valid. And if you're going to do a piece that you did before, you need to show that these pieces are far bigger than any one view of them."

*Lady Macbeth* marked a grim watershed in its composer's career. It was a huge hit in St Petersburg until Stalin saw it, and the dictator then authorised (or possibly dictated) a *Pravda* editorial condemning the composer for a "muddle instead of music". Terrified of being sent to the gulag (or worse), Shostakovich suppressed his more avant-garde works and developed a new style that was acceptable to the regime. "Part of me wonders in a very twisted way whether Stalin saved him," Wigglesworth says. "I don't know of any other symphonist apart from Mahler who has ten mainstream symphonic pieces, and I wonder if that would have been the case if Shostakovich had carried in the more esoteric direction he was heading. Stalin forced him to be accessible — and his genius was to be both interesting and accessible — which neatly brings us back to ENO."

Neil Fisher September 24<sup>th</sup> 2015