

Barry Wordsworth

MUSIC DIRECTOR, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 18 February 2009.

DAVID BAIN WELCOMED BARRY and began by asking how he got into music and conducting. Barry said it was very strange – his parents weren't musical and there was no piano at home but he used to pull out the extension to the table and use it as a pretend keyboard. Eventually his parents sent him for piano lessons and he practised on a piano at his nearby aunt's house every day for a year after which his parents felt he was serious and got a piano at home. He was a fairly average player but joined the church choir and became part of a group which was accompanied by an orchestra which he found very exciting. His contemporaries, he said, were all more talented than him at that age but at 13 he won a scholarship to Trinity College of Music which was opened on Saturdays for junior students. He expressed himself very fortunate to have as a wonderful musical director there, Gladys Puttick. She took all the auditions and after he'd played a Mozart sonata she asked Barry if he ever improvised. He wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or what he should answer but as he'd been taught to be honest he said yes. She asked him to play the National Anthem which he did in G major, she then said to play it in another key, which came very easily to him. She obviously realised there was some good there and asked him to make up a tune starting in one key and transferring to another which he was able to do. He therefore won his place not perhaps through a rather indifferent rendition of Mozart but through improvisation which Gladys believed was an important sign of natural musicianship. At her weekly classes she arranged musical games and made music fun but she was an incredible disciplinarian and hard taskmaster who was upset if anyone didn't toe the line. It was that influence on Barry that made the biggest difference.

The difficulty came when he left Trinity which he loved and wondered what to do next. Trinity offered him a scholarship but he decided to audition elsewhere as he wanted to spread his wings. By that time Sir Adrian Boult, who was at the Royal College, had become his hero and gaining a scholarship there was wonderful. He



Photo by Janet Radenkovic

studied with Sir Adrian whose first question to him was could he do anything else as "music made a wonderful mistress but a bad master." Barry persisted as he thought the only other option for him was to be a beach bum!

David asked at what stage had he become interested in conducting. Barry said it was another curious thing as he'd been at an all boys' grammar school across the street from a girls' grammar school and one year they'd decided to combine forces to do a performance of the Messiah. The music master became sick the week before the performance so the head cancelled the performance but Barry, who was a prefect by that time, suggested he himself should conduct and the head accepted! Given that chance, Barry felt it was the most wonderful thing in the world.

He continued practising piano and harpsichord and gained a scholarship to study in Amsterdam with a wonderful teacher, Gustav Leonhardt. On his return he had nothing particular to do except teach music. One Friday afternoon the phone rang and it was Covent Garden asking if he knew the Frank Martin harpsichord concerto to which Kenneth MacMillan had just choreographed a work. He lied and said yes, and was offered an audition for the following Monday afternoon. He rushed out next day to get the score and soon realised he'd have insufficient time to learn it all, but guessed he'd probably only be asked to start at the beginning, play the cadenza and perhaps the beginning of the other movements. This is more or less what happened and he was offered the job with the first performance the following Monday. At least he then had a week to learn the rest of the concerto! It was a great opportunity for a 22

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year old student – he travelled all over the UK giving two performances a week at a time when the touring company really had a lot of work on. At the end of that year the MacMillan work dropped out of the rep. By then the touring company decided they needed a second conductor and offered him the chance to try out conducting for the ballet *Solitaire* the next week at the Theatre Royal in Brighton. He'd never seen the ballet but did know the music, all went well and he got the job of second conductor. Everyone he knew told him not to get involved with the ballet! But he'd had a traditional upbringing in Surrey and this venture was so exciting that he was hooked from the moment of going into the theatre with all the disciplines of music, dance, staging etc coming together. Incidentally it got him away from the loneliness of the organ loft which by that time he'd also undertaken!

Bit by bit he began to learn how to make a success of conducting for the ballet, partly because of good advice and also because of the patience of people like John Auld, Ashley Lawrence and Peter Wright who were wonderfully helpful, especially the latter who allowed him to make many mistakes. All the colleges had opera schools so you could learn conducting for the opera but it wasn't the same for ballet. Equally there's really no one in a ballet company who can guide you technically – the

management and dancers themselves can't help as they don't speak the same musical language. He feels there's been a wastage of conducting talent of late but this should gradually be resolved, about which more later.

David asked what were the differences conducting for ballet. Barry gave as a comparison accompanying a soloist, where to be successful you have to subdue your own ego and get into the mind of the soloist to produce a performance in the way they see the piece. The complication with dancing is to understand a discipline with which you're not familiar. As a musician you can feel when a singer is about to take a breath and you go with it, dancers behave in a similar way but as a musician you don't feel the same thing. You have to absorb the discipline and be broad-minded and humble enough to inform your conducting 50 per cent from the score and 50 per cent from the choreographer and the expectations of the dancers. If you spend sufficient time on that, you can mould all the elements together so that when it comes to the performance there's no other way to go. You need to be happy working as part of a team and mix your own convictions about the music with thoughts and ideas coming from other directions. Musicians are used to a system of notation which is very good and which can be checked against expert references if needs be. With ballet notation scores as they're not written by the choreographer there isn't the same degree of authority from a notator. The conductor can work through endless evidence on recordings and in discussion with those who are expert or not so expert with a variety of results. Some people will insist a step has always been in such a way and the recorded evidence suggests otherwise.

As a young conductor you're not at liberty to say what you think and you tend to be pushed around a bit which puts people off; as an experienced conductor you can put your own views forward. There are droves of very talented musicians who would never want to get into ballet for that reason and Barry is trying to change that. There will always be those who have no interest but people should be able to get information to enable them to make an informed decision. We're probably not going to be flooded with would-be conductors but there are already two young conductors who will be and indeed already are very good. One of them, Daniel Capps, has been conducting DGV at the recent triple bill. Dominic Grier has come through Jette Parker and is already very accomplished. As a child he trained as a dancer and has enthusiasm and razor sharp intelligence. Conducting for the ballet has had a very bad press in the past. Some people have had no success in the studio and have told all their mates in the musical world how dreadful it is to work in the ballet and thus put others off with their incredible stories. But it's true that some have been reduced to tears by unscrupulous ballet masters who ought to have known better.

Barry was asked to talk through the process of

putting on a ballet. He gave as an example this season's production of *Ondine*. He admires Henze's music more than he can say and *Ondine* is a wonderful ballet which has suffered in the past from bad press and public reception so for him it's a private crusade. First, you have to assimilate the score. It's like getting out of a car in a new place when you look but don't see the detail, just the general shape of things. You then start to focus on the detail and similarly you learn the score going through it quickly first of all and then filling in the gaps. It's unlike conducting a symphony when you are the first and last authority. For ballet you're not, so it's necessary to assimilate the choreography through recordings and other archive material. For a big ballet about six to eight weeks before the rehearsal time Barry starts with small sections of the work and attends as many studio rehearsals as possible. The closer you get to the performance the more frequently you go, and the week before opening you are there all the time. He looks at the call sheet to check what appear to be the most important rehearsals to attend.

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Barry's very hands-on with the rehearsal pianists who need to know his view of the piece so he sits with them and effectively conducts the pianist offering advice in how he wants it to go. If he can't be there for the next rehearsal he fills them in on how it will go. He's also there for the pianist's own sake. Sometimes the dancers come along with their own ideas and it's easier for the conductor to say how it should be rather than the pianist who may not have the same gravitas! In the past we've suffered from conductors who've dipped in and not taken the ballet seriously so the Company, who've done it in a certain way for several weeks, can be wrong-footed, the dancers are then taken by surprise and are understandably angry causing unnecessary tension.

About two weeks before performance, orchestral rehearsals begin. They're three hours long and the conductor needs to know exactly what he wants to do in advance. There's no time to make mistakes as, for *Ondine*, they only had three rehearsals. The secret is to prepare well with the piano in the studio so the dancers know exactly what the music will sound like and they don't go on stage and get surprised from hearing the full orchestra. With all, but especially with modern works, a piano piece sounds very different from an orchestra so

the pianists are encouraged to play in such a way as to reflect this. The dancers then know what they're going to get. A pianist like Henry Roche is like a speedboat, who can change direction and tempi at the drop of a hat but with an orchestra you can't dart about in the same way – it takes time to change direction rather like moving an oil tanker. The dancers have to appreciate this and understand that the orchestra aren't unwilling but are unable to do what a pianist can. After working with the dancers for a long time they trust you and know you will deliver what you promise. David said sometimes the person taking rehearsals still asks the pianist to slow down or sometimes principals will ask the same. Barry said it's always going to be thus but the first thing to discover is, is it just for today or is it a final request? Sometimes it's a question of small changes of phrasing rather than tempo. Some dancers are intuitively more musical and others will ask for something which goes against the music. Negotiation round these corners is all-important. Barry feels the relationship between dancers and music staff is now very good – it's a very sensitive group of dancers who don't want to abuse the music and he's thrilled to be back with the Company at this point in time.

Reverting to Barry's earlier career, he was with the touring company in the late 1970s/early 80s as it became Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet and Peter (later Sir Peter) Wright took over as director when it really took off. It seemed as if the world couldn't get enough of them and that was what kept him in ballet at the time. As a young conductor although he got outside work, it was the ballet which allowed him to travel the world and it was immensely exciting to be the principal conductor of a world class company working with people he still adores like Peter Wright, Desmond Kelly and Marion Tait. Sadler's Wells then transferred to Birmingham which was a very good thing for the company and he left in 1984 for about six years before returning to join the Covent Garden company as music director while all the time continuing with Birmingham until last year when the two jobs became too much.

In the old days a conductor had to train himself and in order to make a success of ballet conducting he had to specialise and devote himself to it full time. An example was Robert Irving who was very talented but admits he got stuck with New York City Ballet and his concert career went down the drain. So the music world can suffer two-fold: those like Robert are lost to the symphony world and there are others who end up in the ballet as no-one else wants them. Barry emphasises to young conductors that they don't now have to specialise in ballet. They'll have a better career if it is one of the things they do. We don't need specialist ballet conductors anymore as the amount of helpful information available is far more than it was 20 years ago. The courses are two years long after which the students themselves know if they are good or not suited to the

job. You must be a good team player as a ballet conductor whereas with a symphonic conductor your ideas are all-important so it's a completely different psychological approach. Every conductor worth his salt has to press his own ideas occasionally just to prove he can. If you're always conducting ballet Barry believes you could become a little dull musically. So he's lucky to have a foot in each camp sometimes doing Beethoven and Brahms where he can still use his will power occasionally! You need to be bloody-minded in the ballet world too as David Bintley pointed out at Barry's farewell party when he left Birmingham!

Talking of conducting an orchestra Barry said there are so many things one could say about orchestras. One of the things he hears is that there must be two orchestras at Covent Garden, one good for the opera and one bad for the ballet. This just isn't so. It's the same team of players totalling 110 to 120 musicians but for most performances there are about 70 in the pit. They all know some of the rep so there's a controlled rotation of those who know, say, *Swan Lake* so there won't be exactly the same members for the 20 performances. With the current triple of less known pieces there are only five performances and exactly the same musicians will be playing each time. They are just as motivated for the ballet as for the opera. No professional wants to turn up and play badly. But Barry's responsibility is to ensure he puts in place everything to make it good for them. They have an internal discipline just like the corps de ballet and the conductor can't interfere with that so Barry has to impress on dancers in the studio that certain things such as changing tempo in the middle of the phrase can't be done as that doesn't work musically and the orchestra won't compromise their professionalism. For the opera if there's a change of cast then there are separate rehearsals but that doesn't happen in ballet. With a variation in three parts – A, B and C – often A and C are the same tempo but B is contrasting. One dancer may request a different tempo, then another dancer may want something else and the orchestra would be confused if you speed up a passage which you said it would be slower. The conductor therefore has the freedom to make tempo a little slower or faster but won't change from one to the other. Tempo can't be treated like a volume control and thus interfere with the pulse which is the life blood of the orchestra. It's like a large machine. If there's a good pulse going then the musicians feel motivated and happy. If that pulse isn't there the dancers become aware but don't know why the orchestra feels funny on a particular night.

David asked if Barry finds differences within himself conducting, say, *Swan Lake* as years go by. Barry said definitely. An actor would deliver Hamlet differently aged 50 from a performance aged 20 and similarly we expect fresh interpretations of a role as in any art form. For example Tamara Rojo with razor sharp intelligence

and who thinks deeply about her performances will say she feels differently about a role as she gets older and ask Barry how to manage this musically. He finds the technical accomplishment of first year corps now is in some cases better than principals of 40 years ago. We're no longer talking about conducting to prevent a dancer from falling over. The conductor did originally have to do something in a certain way to prevent an accident. Now that seldom applies. We have to understand that dancers have muscle memory and though sometimes it's necessary to suggest a dancer does something in a certain way for musical integrity you can't ask dancers to do something stupid because of a musical idea when the choreographer wouldn't have done it. Barry has the utmost admiration for dancers. Early on he was amazed at their incredible discipline. They are now working

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10.30 to 6.30 with five shows a week. Next season there are only three weekends when the company won't perform on a Saturday. Theirs is a devotion to the art form which is unbelievable, so his job is to strike the balance between the orchestra and dancer to the benefit of all.

Asked how to keep the orchestra motivated after, say, 20 *Bayadères*, Barry said as a conductor you have to have conviction. He inherited a situation where there were three Russian conductors all of whom came with conviction and whom he knows, likes and admires enormously. By osmosis the orchestra takes it more seriously and they won't compromise on musical discipline. They are very understanding, not rigid and will change if needed and the ballet appreciate that. The orchestra can cope with repetition as long as it's not mucked about, that is how they train, and they know what makes things tick as long as the conductor has integrity. He heard the Minkus a couple of times recently and found it very satisfying.

When Monica Mason was also in charge of music she wanted Russian conductors do the Russian ballets. Barry said the Royal is a company where the music is an important integral part and Monica, steeped in the tradition, values this greatly. So there's very few decisions made which don't have some sort of impact on the music. His office is next to Monica's so they keep each other in touch. Barry can't imagine how Monica coped with looking after the music as well as the dancers but it gives her an understanding of where he's coming from if he questions anything, and they can come to a reasonably balanced solution. It's usually just a question of perspective and up till now they've never failed to achieve a

compromise. So his job is to liaise with the Company, to make sure the orchestral side is as good as it can be, and to advise on new music. There are new single act ballets and a full length ballet in the offing with commissioned scores from significant composers which have just started to be composed.

Not every new ballet has a commissioned score. Alastair Marriott's new piece is to Debussy piano preludes which were orchestrated by Colin Matthews for Sir Mark Elder and the Hallé. With his help, they have worked it into a wonderful score for ballet which hasn't been heard like this before and is very exciting. At the New Works in the Clore they had two commissioned scores and hope to do more. Barry said it wasn't enough but it's going in the right direction. It is important as sometimes the use of pre-existing concert music is the easy way out. Another exciting element about doing a ballet is about finding the right music. A choreographer will ask for advice on what piece to use, or is what they've chosen right. Balanchine could make wonderful ballets to existing music, but the danger is of creating steps to fit the score. Frequently with a concert piece ninety nine per cent of the time it works but there's always the one per cent of the score that can ruin a ballet. So we need to return to the Diaghilev idea and find the right people. Barry can act as the catalyst and bring all the creative strands together and try to make it happen. Sometimes a translation is needed to help the process forward as choreographers and musicians don't speak the same language and that's a wonderfully fulfilling thing to be able to do.

Another aspect of being a music director is responsibility for the team of pianists for whom he has a great respect. They are a great resource for the company and need motivation. It can be a dispiriting life as they get shouted at and abused which is potentially dangerous. They play for hours a day which is very gruelling work and which a concert pianist wouldn't do. Barry tries to make sure their morale is OK, that they feel rewarded and they get respect from the dancers. He decides who gets the solo spots and now Philip Gammon has gone they have six very able pianists and care and responsibility have to be shown in giving out the treats. When it comes to the choice of guest conductors he shares the responsibility with Monica. For the triple bill they had three different conductors. When it's very tough work, there is an extended 'family' to call on. None of the conductors had previously done more than one of the pieces so they would have had to learn at least two out of the three pieces which would have been difficult with six studios working the whole day and rehearsals taking place from 12.00 after class. Conductors need to be hands on so it wouldn't have worked as you can't leave responsibility with the pianist till the last minute. In the last week conductor needs to be at all the rehearsals. It isn't always shared in that way. Barry will do the next

triple himself because he knows the works and also as he has to spend carefully the company's finances.

Barry is conducting *Isadora* which is somewhat different from its original concept. He said that musically it's very interesting. Deborah MacMillan has been working with Lyn Wake and Christopher Bird and they've been assembling a lot of significant choreographic moments from the ballet using some of the speech and condensing three acts into one of about an hour to include some film archive footage to develop the narrative. He was asked to do it before his current appointment began and said he'd love to, but when he learned it was being condensed he suggested meetings with Richard Rodney Bennett to discuss how it would work. The latter expressed himself very happy but unfortunately he couldn't alter the score as he was too busy so Barry was to do it! Next week he's coming to see what Barry and arranger Martin Ward have done with the score which actually isn't too much. The orchestrations are as he made them, so Barry has really just done a bit of sewing up of the bits that have been cut. They've already had a lot of rehearsals and now it just has to be put together.

Questions from the audience: When booking to see a ballet you expect to hear the ROH orchestra which isn't always the case. Could we see in the booking schedules when there is a different orchestra playing? Barry says he hadn't realised it wasn't sufficiently well aired and the ROH orchestra too have been upset by this too. They are trying to use guest orchestras less often. The Royal Ballet orchestra is the Royal Opera House orchestra and there's a degree of tradition attached to this. You could invite in a wonderful international orchestra but it's not the Royal Ballet's orchestra who has a wealth of experience acquired over the years which we chuck out at our peril. Sometimes there are log-jams where there's simply not enough time and he has suggested it's high time the opera should have the guest orchestra rather than the ballet. The ROH orchestra committee understand the problem and think they should take on the ballet work 'out of contract.' If this can happen we should see fewer guest orchestras.

Barry's ballet recordings have given a great deal of pleasure, some are lost ballets which we no longer see. Will he be doing more? Barry said that in the rep there are still a lot of gaps (*Isadora*, *The Invitation*, *Elite Syncopations*, *Monotones*, *Month in the Country* etc). *The Invitation* is top of Barry's list at the moment and there's a Matyas Seiber anniversary in 2010. He did the ballet many times with the Birmingham orchestra and would love to record it. He's spoken to the trustees of the estate who are very interested but it always comes down to money. There's almost nothing happening now and unless we have funding for these projects they'll run into the ground. Possibly the Seiber estate will help but such recordings cost thousands of pounds.

A member said he couldn't remember the last time there was ballet on TV. Barry said it was a depressing aspect of British TV whereas in France there would be an opera or ballet late on most nights. David commented that in Cuba there is ballet on TV every night. We need to press our case, though Tony Hall is getting more ballet into the cinema which is doing quite well. Maybe we're preaching to the converted there and it won't bring in a different audience, whereas on TV people may come upon it by accident.

Asked about his link with Antonio Pappano, Barry said Tony had conducted twice for the ballet and is very interested and supportive of things balletic. They have a mutual admiration and respect and they have a good relationship which doesn't overcome the fact that they are all trying to get a quart out of a pint pot. The log-jam isn't just in orchestra but also in stage time. The opera can plan much further in advance so they get first bite but having said that the planning procedures aren't as bad as before. The problem isn't anything to do with laziness. The opera can decide what they want to do and then they buy in singers. Monica doesn't know five years in advance what dancers she'll have to do what and it has to be handled with extreme care. There's no malice and the opera are not trying to do ballet out of business. They have to work together so if there is a problem a compromise is always managed. But there'll never be enough time for the orchestra or for the company on stage.

Who chooses singers when they appear in a ballet? Barry said every case is different but the buck stops with himself as music director. For example, in *The Seven Deadly Sins* Will Tuckett was determined to have Martha Wainwright for Anna II as she did exactly what he wanted and there was a certain similarity in looks with Zenaïda Yanowsky who was in the role of Anna I. Martin Yates, the conductor, rehearsed Martha. It was all discussed and under the circumstances that was the best choice to make.

In thanking Barry for a wonderful evening, David said it had been fascinating and extremely interesting to hear about an aspect of the ballet of which we most of us know very little. Barry said this included conductors – when at a party he asked Mark Wigglesworth if he'd conduct for the ballet he looked horrified and said he thought it was like a club and you needed a password to get in! That really stayed with him and he thinks this unhealthy state of affairs needs to be demystified as music is 50 percent of the performance. If he can enthuse and inform the audience that's all to the good. David then suggested that a future talk might be Barry and Tamara Rojo conversing together about their different input into a performance which was met with great enthusiasm by Barry and the audience!

Reported by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Barry Wordsworth and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2009.