

A word in your ear

HUGH MACDONALD had just delivered a lecture when I met him. He is a man who is fascinated by the deaths of composers, and the more gruesome and incredible the death the better.

Thus the story of Alkan being crushed to death by a falling bookcase is one that he treasures. Not that it is of necessity true — but it makes for a good lecture.

Professor MacDonald is also interested in another flamboyant figure in the world of music, Hector Berlioz, and he is indeed recognised as a leading expert on this French composer, which is why he has been commissioned to prepare a new English translation to be used by Opera North, Scottish Opera and Welsh National Opera for their co-production of *The Trojans* which will be seen in Cardiff in the New Year.



Berlioz himself wrote the libretto and it is quite consistent from manuscript to manuscript.

So, unlike many operas — *Don Carlos* and *Tannhauser* are but two examples — where there are important and sometimes difficult choices to be made regarding the version of the opera to be performed, or of the text of the libretto to be used, there is little problem with *The Trojans*.

Even so the quiet spoken musicologist is clearly not one to duck controversy. One exciting aspect of this new production, to be staged by Tim Albery, is that Hugh MacDonald is including in his libretto a scene which has never been performed before.

As he explains, "There are some scenes which Berlioz cut out, one of which is coming back into the Leeds production and into the Cardiff production. This is the Sinon scene. Sinon is a Greek spy who claims to have been betrayed by the Greeks and will therefore assist the Trojans.

"But, of course, he doesn't. The Trojans are taken in and Sinon tells them, 'Yes, you must take the horse into the city.'

"Berlioz himself cut that scene out. So it's never been performed and it's never been done before."

Better known is the fact that Berlioz originally composed an extended ending to the opera, but subsequently shortened it. But, as MacDonald explains, they are not going as far as to stage that original ending, which would have been a truly fascinating experience.

"It's full of symbolism and grandiose visions of the future. Which in the theatre is probably a little difficult to stage. Mind you, the ending which we do have isn't very good either."

Good or not, that is the one that is always performed. The art of the translator is a difficult one where opera is concerned. There is a constant tension between the need for a song and also for a poetic language in the translation.

"I think that one's objective is to try to satisfy all the demands. Often the translator is very happy if he can meet even the most of them. I think that we have got to deal with the sense of the original and we need also to deal with the metrical scheme of the original, including rhyme.

"We've got the capacity of the singers to sing the words, that is to say the vocal comfort of the words. You also have got the audience, who must follow what is being said. I try and keep all of those in my mind at once, and it's very rarely that I'm satisfied with them all."

Berlioz wrote his libretto to *The Trojans* in fine and intricate verse and this causes its own set of problems. MacDonald feels strongly that a translator must reproduce the rhyme schemes if he possibly can.

There do come moments, very often, when either the rhyme has to be sacrificed, or the meaning has to be sacrificed, or the singer has to sing something difficult, or the structure — or the sense of an aria as the audience perceive it — has to be sacrificed.

IFAN PAYNE talks to Trojans translator Hugh MacDonald.

Does he, then, sing the phrases as he translates them, I wondered? "I do not sing phrases out loud, but in my mind I sing them all the time."

Ever controversial in views, he continues, "I do not try them out with singers either. You see, I don't really trust them. I mean I have had plenty of experience with singers and translations. The fatal situation is when they know the work in the original.



"There are very few singers who will comfortably sing it in English when they already know it in French or German.

"Partly because they learn it very deeply and they cannot actually get it out of their system. Once the notes are attached they can't re-attach them."

But there is more. "You meet, also, a sort of unwillingness in singers to see the point of doing it in English."

It is true, of course, that a bane of opera sung in English has been the poor quality of some of the translations of the past which are filled with phrases such as "with rapture I am filled" sung over and over again.

Trite, says Hugh MacDonald. That is what he calls "operatese." Though he admits that even the translator of *The Trojans* can nod.

"You are sometimes trapped into it. I can't always escape it. I always try not to get trapped, but if a line is sung over many times, which is often the case, then you have got to make sure that the quality of the language can stand it."



In heroic language like that which Berlioz wrote, he feels that the translator needs to exclude both the archaic, poetic language and also the vulgar and vernacular language. So that does not leave very much room for manoeuvre, in terms of style.

And, of course, there is that rhyme scheme and that does leave even less linguistic freedom. So the translator feels that he is in tight in a corner all the way.

For these reasons, *The Trojans* is by far the most difficult translation that he has attempted. For example, he has translated Debussy's *Peleas and Melisand*. One would have thought this difficult because it is very French in style and has so much atmosphere.

"But," says MacDonald, "it was actually very easy because it was prose, and its very fluid. I was able to translate the French into English and adjust the music to what I thought was correct English.

"Which is so easy with Debussy because there are so many spare notes, so I could do it. You'd think that it was shocking, but it sounds right doing it that way."

Here, of all the things which Hugh MacDonald has said, is perhaps the most provocative of all. In the conservative field of classical music nothing is more hallowed than the notes which the composer set down. MacDonald does not agree.

"I do tamper. I'm not afraid to tamper with the music. Because my thoughts are always with the audience, not with musicologists and conductors who think that they know better.

"But rather with the people who may know the music moderately well but, not so well that they can say, 'Hey, there should be an extra quaver on that beat.'

"Which is why singers who have done it already are so resentful of making changes."