

“Richard Strauss via the music of Wagner, Liszt and Berlioz has set the pace for the cacophonists.”
– James Gibbons Huneker, New York Sun, July 19, 1903.

Getting started



Those who attended *Choral Masterpieces* would no doubt have enjoyed the singing of our soprano, Eloise Rowland. The program notes show that Eloise has considerable experience, but not that this was her first performance as a concert soloist.

Congratulations, Eloise, you sang like an angel! What a wonderful debut, and the promise of things to come!

While we're on the subject of debuts... Our next concert is Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*. Bernstein's real start as a conductor came with his debut conducting the New York Philharmonic.

The orchestra's resident conductor at the time was Artur Rodzinski, who, as part of his contract, took a bit of a break every now and then to stay in shape. In November 1943 his stand-in was Bruno Walter. Bernstein, an assistant conductor, took his parents to see the maestro perform, and after the concert his father Sam is reputed to have said: "I would give ten years of my life, Lenny, if you could be up there." Lenny rejected the thought, telling his father that it would take years.

That was on Thursday. On Friday, Walter advised management that, due to illness, he would be unable to conduct his final concert, scheduled for Sunday November 14. On Saturday, Bernstein was told to be ready to step in. He had not rehearsed with the orchestra, and the performance was to be broadcast. No rehearsal was possible, just a briefing from the first chair musicians and an hour with Walter at his sick-bed.

When this change of conductor was announced to the audience there was an audible groan of disappointment. Bernstein being Bernstein, this was just the stimulus he needed. The orchestra, well rehearsed by Walter, expected to lead Bernstein, but that wasn't how it worked out. It was Bernstein's concert.

Violinist Jacques Margoles said later "Here were players in their fifties and sixties with long experience. And here this little snot-nose comes in and creates a more exciting performance... and this had nothing to do with Bruno Walter. The orchestra stood up and cheered."

The audience stamped and shouted, giving him a standing ovation and repeated calls back to the podium.

Bernstein was the youngest man ever to direct a Philharmonic subscription concert. At the age of just 25, he was on his way. He celebrated his success with his parents, "four scotches and the best steak I've had in years."

It tends to take sopranos a little longer to reach full maturity. Joan Sutherland made her concert debut, like Eloise, at the age of 21. She was 26 when she made her debut at Covent Garden, but even then had a way to go. It wasn't until she married the right man, Richard Bonyngue, who convinced her to explore the *bel canto* repertoire, that she demonstrated her full potential. She became a star at the age of 33, with her performance of the Mad Scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

We wish Eloise every success in her career, and thank her for sharing her debut with us.

I'Optimisme - All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds - or is it?

In 1947 Leonard Bernstein joined a group of film stars to protest the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee on "subversive activity" by Communists in Hollywood. In 1949 Dmitri Shostakovich attended the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace in New York, and Bernstein agreed to be named as one of the sponsors. In 1951, the Committee published a list of Americans allegedly "affiliated with... Communist-fronted organisations." Bernstein's name was on the list, along with Aaron Copland, Judy Holliday, Lillian Hellman, Paul Robeson, Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann and Frank Lloyd-Wright. His photo in *Life* magazine was headed "Dupes and Fellow Travellers Dress Up Communist Fronts."

Bernstein and Lillian Hellman were collaborating on a play about Joan of Arc and they became close friends. Wanting to make a statement for human freedoms they chose Voltaire's *Candide* as a suitable vehicle. Bernstein said "Puritanical snobbery, phony moralism, inquisitorial attacks on the individual, brave-new-world optimism, essential superiority – aren't these all charges leveled against American society by our best thinkers? And they are also charges made by Voltaire against his own society."

Voltaire wrote *Candide* in 1759 to ridicule the philosophy that maintained that this is the best of all possible worlds. He wrote it in three days, which was somewhat faster than Hellman and Bernstein.

The two started work on *Candide* in 1954, but progress was slow. Bernstein was working on the score for *On the Waterfront*, and had started work on *West Side Story*. "It's the very hardest work I've done for the theatre. I hope it will be the best. I think the hardest should be the best, don't you?"



How well they succeeded I'll leave to our next issue. The story was a difficult one to adapt to a stage musical. Here's how Voltaire's original novel begins:

"In a castle of Westphalia, belonging to the Baron of Thunder-ten-Tronckh, lived a youth, whom nature had endowed with the most gentle manners. His countenance was a true picture of his soul. He combined a true judgment with simplicity of spirit, which was the reason, I apprehend, of his being called *Candide*...

"[The Baron's] daughter Cunegonde was seventeen years of age, fresh-coloured, comely, plump, and desirable...

"The Preceptor Pangloss was the oracle of the family, and little *Candide* heard his lessons with all the good faith of his age and character. Pangloss was professor of metaphysico-theologico-cosmology. He proved admirably that there is no effect without a cause, and that, in this best of all possible worlds, the Baron's castle was the most magnificent of castles, and his lady the best of all possible Baronesses...

"One day Cunegonde, while walking near the castle, in a little wood which they called a park, saw between the bushes, Dr. Pangloss giving a lesson in experimental natural philosophy to her mother's chamber-maid, a little brown wench, very pretty and very docile. As Miss Cunegonde had a great disposition for the sciences, she breathlessly observed the repeated experiments of which she was a witness; she clearly perceived the force of the Doctor's reasons, the effects, and the causes; she turned back greatly flurried, quite pensive, and filled with the desire to be learned; dreaming that she might well be a *sufficient reason* for young *Candide*, and he for her.

She met *Candide* on reaching the castle and blushed; *Candide* blushed also; she wished him good morrow in a faltering tone, and *Candide* spoke to her without knowing what he said. The next day after dinner, as they went from table, Cunegonde and *Candide* found themselves behind a screen; Cunegonde let fall her handkerchief, *Candide* picked it up, she took him innocently by the hand, the youth as innocently kissed the young lady's hand with particular vivacity, sensibility, and grace; their lips met, their eyes sparkled, their knees trembled, their hands strayed. Baron Thunder-ten-Tronckh passed near the screen and beholding this cause and effect chased *Candide* from the castle with great kicks on the backside; Cunegonde fainted away; she was boxed on the ears by the Baroness, as soon as she came to herself; and all was consternation in this most magnificent and most agreeable of all possible castles."

Is this indeed the best of all possible worlds? Follow the adventures of *Candide*, Cunegonde and Dr Pangloss when Newcastle University Choir, with Newcastle Festival Opera, presents *Candide* by Leonard Bernstein at the Newcastle Civic Theatre - Saturday 23 July at 8pm and Sunday 24 July at 2pm.