

# Key change

Philip Wilson talks to out-going Music Director Barry Wordsworth about his career and his move to The Royal Ballet.



It is all change in the musical world in Birmingham this summer – Sakari Oramo has left as Music Director of the CBSO, and Barry Wordsworth leaves the same role at Birmingham Royal Ballet, as he has taken on the position of Music Director for The Royal Ballet.

Ballet aims to be the perfect fusion of dance, art and music, so it was enlightening to hear about Barry's role, and the Royal Ballet Sinfonia, the superb orchestra he has conducted for the past 25 years, and whose skills he praised for their performances in theatre and concert and their wide range of recordings.

The standard programme note tells us that Barry began working with the Company as a soloist in Frank Martin's Harpsichord Concerto (as used by MacMillan for *The Sisters*) and then moved into conducting. Barry talked about his studies in keyboard at the Royal College of Music with (among others) Thurston Dart and, on a scholarship to Amsterdam, with Gustav Leonhardt.

His conducting lessons began differently though – his own madrigal group at school and then a letter to Sir Adrian Boult, who invited his correspondent to a meeting. Barry however, had

then had to explain that this was not convenient, as he was still at school. Sir Adrian re-arranged to a weekend and then offered him a rehearsal pass so he could see the business of putting a performance together. Incidentally, Boult had been the first conductor of the City of Birmingham Orchestra (which became the CBSO in 1948) before moving to London to found the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

Boult later provided more formal instruction for Barry at the Royal College. His conducting teachers included Vernon Handley and, in Amsterdam, Bernard Haitink. Barry mentioned Boult's performances for The Royal Ballet of *Enigma Variations*, late in his career (never to be forgotten by those who attended them), and we shared memories of his Vaughan Williams recordings. However Sir Adrian had been quite clear about how much of conducting could be taught and the point when the young man had to move on to find his own way and style.

Conductors have to 'learn on the job,' and Barry paid tribute to John Auld (who was Director of the Royal Ballet New Group in the 1970s – and who assisted with the recent revival of *Petrushka*) for his support in the early years of his career, and

also to Ashley Lawrence, the Music Director at the time, for encouraging his work with the company in a huge range of ballets. Lawrence had also been a mentor when Barry started work with the BBC Concert Orchestra and Barry had succeeded him as their Principal Conductor. Barry mourned the loss to music caused by Lawrence's early death. Barry was full of admiration for Peter Wright, for his inspired direction of the Company, and for guiding the move to Birmingham so triumphantly. Touring was a much more extended part of the Company's schedule back then, and he recalled with particular warmth the amazing tour which started in New Zealand and returned home via Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia.

He said that David Bintley's support and understanding of the orchestra and all things musical has been crucial in the development of the Company. David's courage in commissioning a large number of original scores from a variety of composers, has been both exciting and inspiring. Barry also reminded me that the Royal Ballet Sinfonia is the orchestra of choice to play for many visiting international ballet companies. No conversation with a ballet conductor or musician can avoid the question of the alleged status of ballet orchestras – they are certainly not second rate!

Of course, we had to talk about Stravinsky, as Barry was preparing for the mixed bill performances. The composer's vast output went through three stages, and each of these periods contains masterpieces written especially for ballet. In fact they are marked by great ballet scores. The Russian period by *The Firebird*, *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*, the neo-classical by *Pulcinella* and the serial by *Agon*. Where would we be without the works from this great man, and yet ballet audiences still seem wary of him. For Barry, the most

exciting period in ballet history so far is the early 20th century, and he is both perplexed and concerned that ballet audiences generally, don't embrace these masterworks with as much enthusiasm as the full-length works of previous eras. One of the most satisfying tasks of his time with Birmingham Royal Ballet has been to conduct the three greatest scores of Stravinsky's early period, *Firebird*, *Petrushka* and *The Rite*, alongside Ravel's masterpiece, *Daphnis and Chloë*, not only in Birmingham, but on tour as well. This must be recognised as a great achievement for Birmingham Royal Ballet and the Royal Ballet Sinfonia.

As to the future, Barry outlined the responsibilities of his new role at Covent Garden in advising on musical matters in programming, scheduling performances and repertory, and in assisting young choreographers in their choice of music. (He is keen to encourage more choreographers to commission scores, and to encourage young pianists and conductors to train in dance and ballet companies.) Expectations are rightly so much higher these days that we cannot continue the old ways of learning on the job. The Jette Parker Young Artists Programme at Covent Garden has just appointed its first ballet conductor for 2008-09 and Barry has himself had musical assistants working with him as part of their preparation for the professional world of music making.

30 years with the Company and Barry's skills and knowledge will be devoted to 'the other company' for the next part of his career. Good luck and all best wishes – we will miss you!

PHILIP WILSON is a great supporter of ballet and music and former Chairman of BRB Friends.