

of the reader if possible.” Check out his Blog – it’s great!

“A lot of modern critics employ double standards. If it’s a new piece they go for it, in the old days they’d have gone at it!”

Ever lighthearted John then told me a criticism joke about Sarasate. “Sarasate last Tuesday left all criticism behind him, as he did the orchestra.”

Sir Thomas Beecham was also reported to be quite a wit and a bit of a joker: wasn’t it Beecham, who, when asked if he had ever conducted any Stockhausen, said, “No, but I once trod in some.”?

“Beecham only ever told me one joke in all the years I worked for him, he needed to have an audience or an orchestra in front of him to become entertaining. Beecham wasn’t the greatest conductor but he was without doubt the most enjoyable.”

Which conductors do you rate in the current crop I asked? “Charles Mackerras, Nikolaus Harnoncourt, John Eliot Gardner, Vladimir Jurowski, Edward Gardner: not in any particular order. I’d like to hear Gustavo Dudamel. There are some good ones around. I’ve done enough conducting myself to know I can’t conduct!”

“Conducting is a mysterious craft, quite undemocratic, like being back in school: some orchestra members hate it. Malcolm Sargent used to treat them like children; Beecham never did.”

In 1948 Sir William Glock invited John Amis to help run a summer school for musicians at Bryanston public school. The now famous summer school moved to Dartington in 1953. Amis remained administrative director until 1981, during which time he and Glock brought to the school a long line of international musicians, amongst them Enesco, Hindemith, Stravinsky and Tippett.

“Michael Tippett was a great friend of mine, we were very close: we were intimate, not in a sexual way as I’m not homosexual and he knew that. He liked young people and he liked me. He really educated me, not just about music, but about everything: he made me think and ask myself questions which I think is the role of a good teacher. The other teacher in my life was Glock. I think I have been very, very lucky altogether, knowing

Britten, Tippett, Walton as they were writing their masterpieces and being able to discuss them with the composers. I’ve met many of the most famous musicians: Messiaen, Nono, Stockhausen, Strauss.”

Meeting Richard Strauss face to face is described as “one of the most climactic moments in my life”. “It was during the Beecham/Strauss Festival in Drury Lane. I was working for Beecham then and went to see him arriving at the same time as Strauss. The door was locked and Strauss turned and looked me straight in the eye and shouted loudly, “diese verdammen Tür”. I was too shocked to say anything. Fortunately someone came and opened it.”

“Stockhausen was an hour late for a TV interview I was doing with him. In about 10 minutes he could have had me licking his boots – he had magnetism: an amazing quality.”

Then we were off down a little side path discussing a letter he’d been outraged by in *The Spectator* which declared *Bel Canto* opera as not having creditable plots. “It’s not natural to sing instead of talking so the whole thing starts off on an unreal foot. The thing about Donizetti, Bellini, Rossini and co is that they made technically wonderful tunes, such wonderful harmonies unlike the incessant burbling of Wagner or the constant din of Harrison Birtwistle. For me, if there’s nothing to remember, there is nothing.”

John Amis and classical music are symbiotic; he talks about music in emotional terms with great passion and an encyclopaedic knowledge created from a lifetime devotion. As I left he was packing to go to the Aldeburgh Festival for the 61st time where he was scheduled to deliver a talk on Britten and Tippett. He tells me, “If I go to a concert nowadays I seldom meet anyone I know, but in Aldeburgh I know everyone.” I can believe it.

Friendly, warm, intelligent and funny: in a word John Amis is irreplaceable; his new ‘bird’ better watch out though as I might just be tempted to give her a run for her money! ■

### My Music in London 1945 - 2000

Publisher: Amiscellany Books

ISBN-10: 0955158001

ISBN-13: 978-0955158001

<http://johnamismusic.blogspot.com/>



Dame Kiri te Kanawa

Refugees are grateful people and Georg Solti never forgot how many people helped him to get work with letters of recommendation, including Arturo Toscanini with whom he had worked as a répétiteur at the Salzburg Festival. His philosophy was simple but also hard, “never give up!”, and because he knew how hard it was for musicians to get a lucky break he wanted to share his luck with them.

Valerie, Lady Solti, told me that in the last years of his life he had thought of starting a répétiteurs course, but that is something for the future. After his death in 1997 there have been many projects associated with his name, and the most recent is a *bel canto* course at the Accademia Solti in Castiglione della Pescaia, a small and elegant coastal village in Tuscany where he and his family own a house and where he used to spend all his holidays.

This project has developed in the last six years thanks to the tireless work and organisational skills of its co founder, Candice Woods, and several important sponsors, especially the Peretti Foundation. Solti’s generosity is in evidence, the course is free and so is the accommodation and food for all 14 singers and two répétiteurs during the three week period. The structure allows for five initial days working with well known singers such as Mirella Freni or Leo Nucci. This year Kiri te Kanawa and Frederica von Stade shared the honours with completely different styles. Solti’s favourite soprano and friend concentrated on singing technique, voice support and exercises, whilst von Stade took care of phrasing and also of giving courage to the singers for the task ahead. “My job is to give them confidence, I do not wish to hurt anybody but sometimes vices creep in and a singer does not know how to



Valerie, Lady Solti



All photos Eduardo Benarroch

# Georg Solti's helping hand

Eduardo Benarroch reviews this famous *bel canto* course

correct them, that's what I am here for," explained Flicka von Stade with her quiet and modest manner. She loves working with disadvantaged children in Oakland, California," and that is where my heart is at the moment", adds Flicka. Both are good friends and that allows for a good working atmosphere, one can interrupt the other without problems and they often laugh together.

Kiri te Kanawa adopts a tougher but kind approach, "you have to learn to support properly, this is a red flag day for you!" explains the Maori soprano to one of the best voices of the course, the American baritone Nathan Herfindahl. She wants his tongue to face down, "it seems stupid but it works ... here's a mirror, look at your tongue". Later they sing together a duet from *I Pagliacci*, and where else would a young singer get the chance to sing with Kiri te Kanawa as Nedda? She needs to be a diplomat as well to convey her message. Singers are notoriously difficult to change their habits even if they are bad habits but they can also feel the difference and slowly they relax and have confidence, and to inspire that confidence is also part of being a good teacher! "Be brave Nathan, don't quit! Your voice is big enough, do not give more..."

Later we hear soprano Narine Ojakhyan from Armenia and the advice comes hard and fast, "if you are going to push a note make sure you start it well, be confident, on stage nobody can touch you..."

A young and beautiful singer from the Mariinsky is also taking part and soon her repertoire is completely changed, "for the next three months you should just sing Mozart ... *Ach ich fuehl's, Porgi amor...*". 22 year old Eleonora Vindau has time on her side and she is willing to learn.

After five days with star singers comes the hard grind of working for the final recital on 19 July at the renowned Hotel Andana preceded by a free concert at Piazza Solti at the top of the hill overlooking the bay, on 18 July. This work involves Maestro Paolo Specca, Professor Emanuela Ferrari and Corradina Caporello and Drama Coach Shirley Keane as well as the Accademia's Artistic Director



Federica von Stade with Kiri te Kanawa

Jonathan Papp who acts as accompanist and vocal coach. There is a close collaboration between the Royal Academy of Music in London, the Julliard School in New York, the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and the Conservatorio di Pescara.

The atmosphere is relaxed but serious, all students have full schedules and they work hard, "it's amazing to see

how they develop in such a short period of time", explains the enthusiastic and always patient Papp.

The spirit is that of Georg Solti. "He always had the dream to hold masterclasses here in Castiglione and I hope in a way we are fulfilling his dream", explained Lady Valerie with emotion in her eyes. "My husband was often misunderstood, at the end of his life he took many new interests, he would have loved the idea of this Accademia and he would have laughed as he never conducted *bel canto*!" ■