

**National Review of Opera
Singer Training**

The Ritterman Review

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NATIONAL REVIEW OF OPERA SINGER TRAINING

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NATIONAL REVIEW OF OPERA SINGER TRAINING

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Previous Reviews of Opera Training in Britain

This is not the first review of this kind which has been commissioned by the Arts Council. Since 1960, two major reviews have occurred. The present review has therefore been undertaken in the knowledge of the existence of these reviews and of their impact on the training of opera singers in this country.

The first took place in 1960, when the late Lord Bridges was commissioned by the Arts Council to conduct a review of the training of opera singers. This enquiry recommended that opera training of a postgraduate character - that is, of a more advanced and specialised kind than was then provided by British Music Colleges - should be made available, and that this training should include public performance in a fully professional environment, with skilled and experienced direction. The findings of this report led in 1963 to the establishment of the London Opera Centre.

In 1976, after thirteen years of the operation of the Centre, the Arts Council commissioned a further review of the facilities available for advanced opera training in Britain. This enquiry, chaired by Sir Hugh Willatt, then Secretary-General of the Council, was set up specifically to consider the work of the London Opera Centre in relationship to the changes which had occurred since its establishment - changes in the facilities provided by Music Colleges, as well as in the number of opera companies in Britain and the opportunities which they afforded to young singers.

The recommendations in the resulting report¹ led to the closure of the London Opera Centre, which was then training approximately forty students a year (singers, répétiteurs and stage management trainees) on courses mainly of two years duration, and to the adoption of the alternative arrangement for the provision of advanced training which was advocated. As a result, the London Opera Centre was replaced in 1977 by the National Opera Studio. The report incorporated detailed recommendations for the establishment, structure and operation of the Studio, which it envisaged as having functions 'somewhat different from those of the present London Opera Centre, and without the heavy establishment (and establishment costs) of that organisation'.² Central to the review had been a consideration of the relationship with professional companies desirable for training at this level. Whereas the London Opera Centre had operated in close conjunction with The Royal Opera House, the Willatt Report recommended that the responsibility for the

¹ Sir Hugh Willatt *Report to the Arts Council of Great Britain on the present facilities for advanced opera training in Great Britain and recommendations for the future.* (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976).

² Willatt Report (1976), p.21.

new Studio would rest with all of the major Opera Companies - that it would be 'their Studio'.³

1.2 Purpose of the present Review

As part of the Arts Council's appraisal process, whereby all revenue-funded clients are formally appraised by an independent team every five years, the National Opera Studio is due to be appraised in 1993. Because of the unique position of the Studio in the British pattern of training, it was felt that the appraisal should be informed by a review of the current position regarding the training and professional development of opera singers in Britain.

The task of this Review,⁴ for which the terms of reference are set out in paragraph 1.3 below, therefore mirrors in part that of the two earlier reviews described above. An essential difference, however, lies in the relationship between this Review and the appraisal described in the preceding paragraph. Whereas the Willatt Report considered specifically the operation of the London Opera Centre, the appraisal of the National Opera Studio forms no part of this Review and therefore is not incorporated in this report. This appraisal will be undertaken separately, as part of the Arts Council appraisal process. The present report is provided as a background document to inform the appraisal. Reference is made (in Section 4) to the National Opera Studio but only insofar as it forms a key element of the overall pattern of training and professional development currently available to young singers.

1.3 Terms of reference of the 1992/3 Review

'To advise the Arts Council's Music Advisory Panel and Training Board on the development of training for opera singers⁵ in Britain, taking account of current provision, and the opportunities for the professional development of young singers during the first five years of their careers.'

1.4 Methodology

The Review was conducted by Professor Janet Ritterman, Principal of Dartington College of Arts and a member of the Arts Council's Music Advisory Panel and Training Board, and Kathryn McDowell, Officer responsible for Opera and Music Theatre, Arts Council of Great Britain. Dr Rita McAllister (Chairperson, Music Advisory Committee, Scottish Arts Council) and Keith Griffin (Music Officer, Welsh Arts Council) were consulted regarding the existing opportunities for young singers and the potential for development in Scotland and Wales.

³ Ibid., p.24.

⁴ All subsequent references within this document to the 'Review', refer to the 1992/3 Review.

⁵ For the purposes of this Review, the term 'opera' should be read as including any form of staged work within the Western art traditions of opera, music-theatre and musical.

Statistical research to support the work of the Review was commissioned from Ruth Towse, Lecturer in Economics at University of Exeter and author of a forthcoming study on economic aspects of the singing profession.⁶

The methodology adopted for this Review replicates in most respects that adopted by the Willatt Review. Views presented in this report, which attempts to reflect and synthesize key issues arising from the Review, emerged mainly from semi-structured interviews with individuals and groups. The Review canvassed the opinions of senior staff within Opera Companies funded by The Arts Council of Great Britain, The Scottish Arts Council and The Welsh Arts Council. General Directors/Administrators, Music Directors, Heads of Planning, Heads of Music, Chorus Masters, and a range of conductors, producers and singers who work regularly with British Companies were consulted. Heads of Vocal and Opera Studies at the Music Colleges, senior staff of the National Opera Studio and a number of composers who have worked with British Opera Companies were also approached.

The Review has also drawn on the findings of recent reports on opera provision and on education and training. These are cited in footnotes where appropriate.

The Arts Council is grateful to all those who gave evidence to the Review and appreciated, in particular, the widespread interest in and concern for the development of young opera singers. It is hoped that this report will serve to emphasise the need for clearly-structured professional development for young singers in the early years of their careers.

1.5 Focus of the Review

Since the 1960s standards of training and professional development available in Britain have been raised. Britain has now gained a reputation abroad for the operatic training it offers to young singers. A number of the conductors, producers and leading opera administrators interviewed during this review confirmed that the training available compares very favourably with that provided in other European countries and in the USA. This situation reflects the commitment and efforts of many individuals and organisations, not all of whose work can be adequately acknowledged in this brief report.

Some of the outcomes, however, are now evident in the increasing reputations of British singers, both at home and abroad. There is ample evidence that in the thirty-year period since the establishment of the London Opera Centre in 1963, the number of British singers receiving their basic training at home and subsequently enjoying international careers has steadily increased. During the same period, professional opportunities have expanded, as have been expectations - both within and outside the profession - as to what can and indeed should be systematically provided. National interest in work-related training is developing rapidly, as is reflected, for example, in the emergence of bodies such as the Arts and Entertainment Training Council and in the development of a framework of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

⁶ Ruth Towse *Singers in the Marketplace: The Economics of the Singing Profession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

The Willatt Report of 1976 assumed, as its starting point, that patterns of advanced training needed constantly to take account of changing circumstances in the professional world of opera as well as in the provision made by Music Colleges. It is from this assumption that the present Review also begins, and against the background of changes in both of these spheres that the advice requested in the terms of reference (cf. paragraph 1.3 above) is offered. This advice is summarised in Section 6 of the report.

There is much in this document which echoes observations in the Willatt Report. This is not in any sense because the changes of the last twenty-five years have been discounted: many of those whose views are reflected here have themselves been involved in spearheading and implementing significant developments in opera provision and opera training during this time. Rather, it is because members of the profession - freelance, within the Opera Companies and within the Music Colleges - remain consistent in their conviction that the closest possible liaison between the profession and the training providers is essential if the professional development of young singers is to remain effective and up-to-date. Although circumstances have changed, many of the arguments advanced there and the priorities identified remain relevant today. On the evidence of this Review, their whole-hearted acceptance would contribute significantly to the development of advanced opera training.

1.6 Phases of training

The Willatt Report identified two main stages in the professional training and development of young singers - the first provided within the Music Colleges; the second, the stage at which guided experience of work under professional conditions was the essential characteristic. This bipartite division has been adopted in the 1992/3 Review and forms the basis on which the present report is organised. The training and professional development needed by young singers is considered as falling into these two phases which, while sharing common features, are distinguishable in terms of priorities and therefore, in terms of appropriateness of provision.

As indicated in the terms of reference, it is on the second phase that this Review has principally focused. Inevitably this phase is more difficult to chart: the process of this Review has demonstrated the benefits that might accrue from further investigation and, in particular, from systematic longitudinal studies. It has, however, been possible to identify some of the most significant changes in the context within which advanced operatic training now takes place. It is hoped that the Report will serve as a contribution towards the emergence of a forward-looking national policy for the training and professional development of young singers to meet the needs of the twenty-first century.

2 OPERA PROVISION IN BRITAIN: 1960 - 1993

2.1 The Major Companies

The Willatt Report signalled the significance for opera training of the increase in the number of professional Opera Companies in Britain which occurred in the fifteen years from 1960 to 1975.⁷ At the time of the Bridges Report (1960), there were three permanent companies - the Royal Opera House, Sadler's Wells and the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company - with the Glyndebourne Festival and the English Opera Group providing short annual seasons. By 1976 the Sadler's Wells Company had moved to the Coliseum, becoming English National Opera, and the regional companies in Cardiff and Glasgow had developed into full-time operations. Since the publication of the Willatt Report, further developments have taken place in the pattern of provision of mainstream companies undertaking large-scale and medium-scale work: by 1980, under the banner of Opera North, English National Opera had developed a base in Leeds; Kent Opera had emerged. The demise of Kent Opera, after the withdrawal of its funding in 1989, has left six major Opera Companies providing large-scale work around the country.⁸

2.2 Other Companies

During the 1980s there was a noticeable increase in the number of small-scale companies in Britain. Various commentators have reflected on the factors which may have contributed to this and, in particular, on the possible influence of television and the recording industry. Whatever the causes, the effect on provision, and on opportunities for singers, has been significant. The 1992 Gulbenkian discussion document on small-scale touring and music-theatre in the UK, *Beggars' Opera*, from which the term 'other companies' has been adopted, estimated that there are probably between forty and fifty small companies working in Britain today, some working for one short season a year, others on an occasional project basis.⁹ The report points to the absence of any easily accessible register of these companies: some twenty-five of them, however, are identified among the principal contributors to that inquiry. The productions of these companies now provide an important training ground for many young singers.

⁷ Willatt Report (1976), p.13.

⁸ The work of the major companies has been summarised in *Cultural Trends* (Policy Studies Institute, 1989), ed. Andrew Feist and Robert Hutchison. A summary of the findings of the PSI report is included in Graham Devlin, *Beggars' Opera. A discussion document on small-scale touring opera and music-theatre in the UK* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1992), pp.3-7.

⁹ Devlin (1992), p.21.

The Gulbenkian document classifies the repertoire of these groups as falling into two main categories:

- (i) reduced or re-scored versions of the 'classical' (*ie* pre-twentieth century) canon;
- (ii) music-theatre and opera written in the twentieth century (sometimes specially commissioned and premiered by the company), performed by the forces for which it was written.¹⁰

The emergence of the second of these categories - contemporary work - has been one of the significant features of the last fifteen years.¹¹ So has the expansion of staged work from the Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque periods which is not adequately represented by the first of Devlin's two categories. The final section of this report includes a recommendation which relates this expansion of what has conventionally been regarded as the 'standard repertoire' to the professional training of young singers.

2.3 Touring

Opera touring within this country by British companies has always constituted a key element of operatic provision. Over the years, it has contributed significantly to the professional development of many British singers. Although the detailed patterns of touring have changed, in any account of opera provision it continues to constitute an essential part of the total picture. Touring remains a key element of the work of some of the major companies; now, as is implied by the figures quoted above (paragraph 2.2), there are many more small-scale touring groups. Most are not building-based companies, and touring work - both in Britain and elsewhere in Europe - is central to their operation.

Some function along lines similar to 'Opera for All', a touring operation established by the Arts Council in 1949, which mounted performances in small venues, given by a handful of singers and a pianist, with the support of a small technical team.¹² This operation was taken over in later years by the London Opera Centre and by some of the regional companies,¹³ while the Arts Council retained responsibility for its administration and finance. The specific role served by 'Opera for All' in the professional development of young singers has now been embraced by English Touring Opera. In keeping with its origins, English Touring Opera aims to provide opportunities for young

¹⁰ Devlin, p.26.

¹¹ For discussion of this, see Devlin (1976), Chapter 5 (pp. 35-42).

¹² The value of experience on the scale provided by 'Opera for All' was mentioned by many of the more experienced performers interviewed, thus echoing comments in the Willatt Report. These tours, quite apart from their value to the communities visited, enabled young singers to develop performance skills and to learn repertoire in situations less exposed than those provided by larger companies, with less attendant publicity.

¹³ For details, see Willatt Report (1976), p.32.

singers in principal roles and to perform in venues which do not regularly receive larger touring companies. But the company employs a professional chamber orchestra and aims to present fully-staged productions. The performances of a number of these touring groups, which often provide employment for young singers during their early years in the profession, often take place in theatres which would conventionally be regarded as 'medium-scale'.¹⁴

2.4 Policies towards young singers

As part of the Review, the main opera and music-theatre companies in receipt of Arts Council funding were invited to describe their policies in relation to the employment and support of young singers. From this there emerges evidence of real commitment to the encouragement of young singers, although no clear sense of there being any effective means for its overall co-ordination.

The volume and range of work now available in Britain for young singers is noteworthy. Between them, these companies provided just over a thousand performances during the 1991/92 season.¹⁵ When the productions of smaller groups are included, the picture which emerges is of a buoyant and diverse professional environment. There have, however, been significant changes in the specific ways in which companies are now able to support the development of young singers during their early years in the profession. This is discussed in detail in Section 4, which focuses on the opportunities available during the second phase of training and professional development - that obtained during the first five years of professional life. Before this, in Section 3, recent changes to the experience now available to young singers as part of formal education and training are briefly outlined.

¹⁴ For further comment on this point, see paragraph 4.7 below.

¹⁵ In 1991/2, the Royal Opera, English National Opera, Opera North, Welsh National Opera, Scottish Opera and Glyndebourne Festival Opera provided 831 performances of 79 operas in 1991/2. Glyndebourne Touring Opera, English Touring Opera, City of Birmingham Touring Opera, Opera Factory, Opera Northern Ireland, Pimlico Opera and Buxton Festival Opera provided a further 235 performances.

3 THE FIRST PHASE: FORMAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

3.1 The emergence of postgraduate training

It is during the first phase, the undergraduate/postgraduate phase - that is, the phase falling within the formal higher education system - that many young singers experience their first intensive vocal and operatic training. Most students complete this phase by their mid to late twenties.¹⁶ Singers seeking specialised postgraduate courses normally apply to Music Colleges, although some may have undertaken their undergraduate study in other higher education institutions.

At the time of the Bridges Report (1960), the opera training provided by most of the Music Colleges was not generally regarded as extending to postgraduate level: it was in part for this reason that the London Opera Centre was established.¹⁷ By 1976, when the Willatt Report appeared, operatic training at a more advanced level had become established in a number of the Colleges.¹⁸ The Report maintained, however, that 'there still remains a need for further guidance and training to bridge the gap between student conditions and professional performance'.¹⁹ It was this particular gap that the National Opera Studio was established to fill.

This section of the report focuses on recent changes in the postgraduate opera courses now provided within British Music Colleges. Although formal education and training at this level undertaken by young singers is not provided exclusively by Music Colleges (and not all singers who enter the profession do so by this type of route)²⁰, it is within the postgraduate courses offered by the Music Colleges that changes have occurred which have been most noticed and welcomed by members of the profession who were interviewed as part of this Review. While any detailed consideration of course content at this level lies outside the remit of this Review, a brief account of the change in course length is offered below. This is followed by a short summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the 'new breed' of young singer emerging from these courses, as perceived by those responsible for their training and those members of the profession likely to be able to offer them work with one of the major companies in this country.

¹⁶ A number of those interviewed as part of the Review expressed their regret that it appears to be impractical for this first phase to be undertaken later by singers, to take account of the processes of vocal maturation. Although noted here, the issues which this raises are seen as lying outside the scope of this Review.

¹⁷ Willatt Report (1976), p.4.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp.9-12 *passim*.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.12.

²⁰ For male singers in particular, intensive choral experience has often served as pre-professional training.

3.2 Recent developments in postgraduate opera courses

Since the Willatt Report, the curricula for vocal and operatic studies in British Music Colleges have expanded considerably. In 1976, the maximum course of study was described as four years.²¹ Now, with opera studies often forming a significant, discrete element of postgraduate provision, it is not unusual for an aspiring opera singer to spend six or even seven years at college before attempting to enter the profession. Six-year vocal studies courses (or courses described as offering a specialism in opera for two years after the basic four-year undergraduate vocal studies course) have become almost the norm. Such courses are now provided by the Royal Northern College of Music, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and at the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music, within the Joint Vocal Faculty. The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama offers courses lasting five to six years; Trinity College of Music and the Welsh College of Music and Drama are currently planning to extend and develop their courses.

It seems likely that this extension of provision has, as predicted in the Willatt Report, encouraged a sharper focus. In 1991/2 there were 139 vocal students on postgraduate opera courses at the Royal Academy of Music, the Royal College of Music, the Guildhall College of Music and Drama and the Royal Northern College of Music;²² the Willatt Report identified 192 students as receiving opera training in these four institutions in 1975/6.²³

3.3 Strengths and weaknesses of young singers

The introduction of six-year courses with a two-year specialisation in opera was mentioned by many of those interviewed as part of this Review as a welcome development, and one which was already beginning to make an impact on standards within the profession. The comments on strengths and weaknesses, which are summarised below, were made within this context: they are intended principally to identify those areas where, in a well-sequenced pattern of professional development, continued attention should be given beyond the completion of the first phase of training.

On the particular areas, there was a high level of agreement among those interviewed. The vocal abilities of the best young singers were generally acknowledged. It was felt that the majority were open-minded and flexible in their approach to work, although most of the producers interviewed would have liked them to have developed more advanced dramatic skills. Conductors and members of music staff cited the overall level of musicianship as still remaining an area of weakness for some, while acknowledging that this was not true of those singers who had had substantial experience as choristers or as advanced performers on another instrument. Knowledge of other artforms and breadth of general education were often mentioned as regrettable shortcomings, but many confirmed that there has been a marked improvement in young singers' ability to handle

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.10, 14, 15.

²² Figures provided by the named institutions.

²³ Willatt Report (1976), Appendix E.

contemporary work and their interest in this field. While facility in foreign languages among young British singers was described as improving, continuing concern about English diction was expressed by many producers, conductors, members of music staff and senior management. It was emphasised that constant attention needed to be given to diction from the earliest stages of training.

The range of experience now provided at postgraduate level for young singers to perform in fully-staged productions of major works, as well as in less formal events and workshops, was noted with pleasure. Despite this, several of the representatives of Opera Companies consulted during the Review felt that young singers' performance at auditions could be significantly improved with better advice on the choice of repertoire for these occasions. While none wished to see a stereotyped approach (described by some as characteristic of audition technique in certain other countries), the point was made that repertoire presented was not always chosen with a critical awareness of an individual singer's suitability for a particular role, or with a consciousness of the characteristics of the company concerned. Presentation during auditions was described as often poor by professional standards, with some young singers reluctant to introduce their programmes or unable to do so effectively.

4 THE SECOND PHASE: BETWEEN FORMAL TRAINING AND THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD

4.1 Routes into the profession

It was readily acknowledged by all those interviewed as part of the Review that, because of the highly individual nature of vocal development, there can be no single path to becoming an established opera singer which is suited to all. Nevertheless there have been a number of routes which, during the last thirty or so years, have proved highly effective in developing operatic talent in this country. Among these have been the National Opera Studio, and its predecessor, the London Opera Centre as well as the various employment opportunities provided within leading Opera Companies. This section of the report deals with the contribution which these offer to the professional development of young singers in the early years of their careers.

There has always been a handful of singers who have emerged (whether from Music College or elsewhere) seemingly equipped to enter the professional world, and who quickly become established as leading artists in their own right. This point, made emphatically in the Willatt Report,²⁴ is equally true today. For most, however, operatic careers have developed at a more steady pace. In supporting this more measured progression, the National Opera Studio has played an important role.

4.2 The National Opera Studio

As has been mentioned earlier in this Report, the basic aims, structure and organisation of the National Opera Studio were set out in the Willatt Report. The Studio, by providing 'experience of work under professional conditions' was intended to build on the training which young singers had already acquired at Music College and to ensure that they 'would continue to receive guidance through the next stage of their entry into the profession, and in certain matters of continuance of tuition'.²⁵

The National Opera Studio has, since its inception, been regarded within the opera profession as a valuable opportunity for singers to receive intensive and expert coaching on key roles and to consolidate dramatic skills. The intensive individual coaching provided by the Studio (approximately four times the amount per week which a postgraduate singer at a Music College would expect to receive on a regular basis) is viewed as a particular benefit for young singers. The Studio focuses on the study of roles from the traditional opera repertoire which it is thought that singers are likely to encounter during their professional career.

Since many of the staff associated with the Studio are regularly employed by the main companies, the Studio is regarded as being ideally positioned to prepare students for the profession and to provide 'fine-tuning' of already well-developed skills. For applicants, the perceived contact between the Studio and the professional companies with whom

²⁴ Willatt Report (1976), pp.11-12.

²⁵ Ibid., p.21.

young singers hope to obtain future work, is one of its main attractions. The career paths of former students show that, for a significant number of singers, the National Opera Studio has provided an effective bridge between college and the profession. Of the 192 singers who have passed through the Studio since its inception in 1977, approximately 80% are working regularly with recognised Opera Companies in Britain and abroad. A number of those interviewed suggested that, in recent years, and particularly since the introduction by the Music Colleges of longer courses offering more advanced training, some talented young singers have seen their natural next step as being to move straight into professional work, bypassing the Studio. This Review did not attempt to explore this issue, since such matters will form part of the appraisal of the National Opera Studio itself.

The basic aims of the National Opera Studio are widely acclaimed abroad. Even in America, where many of the large Houses have opera centres attached, there is no studio provision of a comparable nature. However, the changes in the level and range of training now provided by British Music Colleges and the changing demands of the professional world must inevitably have required the Studio in recent years to reassess its provision and its approaches to training in order to continue to fulfil its distinctive role within the continuum of training and professional development.

4.3 The House Principal system

Some of the most significant training for young singers has traditionally been that provided within the Opera Companies. The 'House Principal' system, as it has operated in the major British companies, has provided one of the most important and least-acknowledged of the training grounds for young singers. The key features of this system are outlined below, before the changes to the system which have occurred in the past ten to fifteen years are described. This is followed by comment on the benefits and potential disadvantages of chorus experience as one element of the further training and professional development for aspiring soloists.

Until the early 1980s the major British Opera Houses had resident companies, with salaried principal singers (called 'House Principals') on fixed-term contracts of one to three years, which were regularly renewed. Many singers on House Principal contracts have remained with these companies for the major part of their careers. The understanding has been that, while House Principals were able to apply for time off to perform in concerts and productions elsewhere, their first duty was to the Company. Generally, singers joined companies on House Principal contracts in their early years in the profession, first understudying roles and singing small parts. Regular coaching was provided by experienced members of the House music staff and under their guidance, singers gradually progressed through the repertoire as their voices matured.

4.4 Changes to the House Principal system

The last decade has been characterised by a marked decline in the number of House Principals employed by the major British companies. In 1980, the Royal Opera, English National Opera, Scottish Opera, Opera North and Welsh National Opera together employed 67 House Principals. By 1993 this figure had fallen to twenty-eight, twenty of whom are employed by ENO. Of these twenty, none are in the first five years of their

professional careers. The Royal Opera now has only five House Principals; Scottish Opera and Opera North have none.²⁶ It is now the norm for principal singers to be engaged on a freelance basis. While each company tends to have a core of principal singers whom it regularly engages, these singers have no guarantee of continuing work, nor in general do they benefit from coaching on repertoire for future seasons.

The reasons advanced for this change in practice are various. According to members of the senior management of some companies, when the matter was discussed during the course of this Review, the most able singers no longer wish to be tied to one company. This view was endorsed by those agents who were consulted. Managers of opera companies also maintained that the gradual reduction in the number of productions per year has made the House Principal system untenable: singers would often be either inappropriately cast or under-employed.

However, there was general consensus that, while the House Principal system may also have limitations for the mature singer in the current climate of wide opportunity, it is precisely those limitations which can be of benefit to young singers particularly during the first five years. It offers some security of employment and the encouragement to 'pace' a career. Structured professional development is provided: new roles are prepared gradually under the coaching of House music staff²⁷ and career advice is available from a range of people with well-established contacts in the profession. The Willatt Report reported in some detail the body of support which existed for 'in-company' training.²⁸ For reasons similar to those advanced in the Willatt Report, key members of the profession interviewed as part of this Review expressed strong support for schemes of this kind and their desire to find ways of implementing them.²⁹

²⁶ Information as at date of publication of Review (August 1993).

²⁷ It should be noted that the reduction in the number of House Principals on contract is not only affecting singers themselves, but is undermining the effectiveness of other parts of the infrastructure. The fall in the number of singers on House Principal contracts has led to a reduction in the amount of coaching now carried out by House music staff. Concern was expressed by some senior figures in the profession that the art of coaching may be lost as the older generation retire, since there are fewer opportunities for young répétiteurs to learn from established coaches and also from working with experienced singers.

²⁸ Willatt Report (1976), pp. 17-18.

²⁹ Welsh National Opera has recently taken on three young singers, with the intention of helping to structure and pace their development. English National Opera is also considering a similar scheme.

4.5 Chorus experience

Traditionally, the chorus has served as a training ground for many young principals. It provides valuable experience on stage, working with leading professionals, and offers the opportunity to observe experienced principal singers in rehearsal and performance. Early experience as a member of an opera chorus with a major company provided some of today's principal singers with a key element of their professional development. During the course of this Review, many of the more experienced singers and music staff of opera companies commented with regret that most of the promising young singers now emerging from Music Colleges seem not to be interested in chorus work, because they aspire to principal roles and fear being 'branded' as choristers.

While the statistics for the choruses of the major opera companies in 1991/2 appear to reflect a more positive outlook,³⁰ the influence of Glyndebourne's recruitment policies on the overall position must be borne in mind.³¹ The Chorus of Glyndebourne Festival Opera employs young singers almost exclusively on a seasonal basis. Experience as a member of the Glyndebourne Chorus is keenly sought, since it offers the benefits of chorus experience without the threat of becoming typecast. It also provides some singers with the opportunity to cover and to take roles during the subsequent tour.

The longer-term implications of this situation have not been ignored by the major companies. Scottish Opera, Welsh National Opera and Opera North are seeking to increase the appeal of the chorus for aspiring soloists. Welsh National Opera has a long tradition of offering small parts and understudy roles to choristers.³² Scottish Opera operates a sabbatical system which enables choristers to take up to one year's leave of absence without loss of future employment. Many of those interviewed as part of the Review felt that further developments of this kind could prove beneficial, for the value of chorus experience as part of the career development of aspiring principals was generally endorsed. It must be recognised, however, that the current composition of some opera choruses and the frequency with which those who become chorus members remain chorus members for life inevitably deters many young singers for whom chorus membership should be a stepping stone rather than a final destination.

4.6 The current position

A number of the more experienced performers consulted during this Review expressed concern that changes in the broader context within which this second phase of opera training is located, seem to be reducing the effectiveness of some of these 'tried and

³⁰ In 1991/2, 106 of the 359 places (30%) were held by singers in the first five years of their career. Of the 3580 singers who auditioned for chorus positions in that year, 50% were young singers.

³¹ If the Glyndebourne Chorus is removed from the statistics, the percentage of young singers employed in choruses drops to 18%, this being 52 of the 291 permanent places available.

³² Cf. Willatt Report (1976), p.19.

tested' routes. While it was accepted that new routes may be emerging, it was felt that these are not as yet clearly charted.

It is undoubtedly true that the character and range of the professional opportunities available to young singers have altered significantly during the past decade. The gradual dismantling of the House Principal system has removed the structured professional development and career support which was available to many leading singers for a significant portion of their careers. For many, chorus work does not prove an attractive alternative.

But while the nature of employment available in this country³³ for young singers has altered, the range of opportunities has increased. Continued use of the phrase, 'the profession', which is used in several places in this report to embrace the broad spectrum of opportunities now available to young singers, is probably no longer appropriate, for it seems to suggest a homogeneity which is far from the reality of the situation. Young singers are now faced with a wide range of professional opportunities, albeit on a freelance basis and without the security or support which leading singers of earlier generations could, if they wished, virtually take for granted. These opportunities include work on all scales and within many different genres - with the major companies as well as with smaller groups. Information provided by the major British companies as part of this Review shows that in 1991/2, taking all six of the major companies together, young British singers in the first five years of their careers accounted for 35% of the total number of principal singers contracted for that season. Inevitably, the two London-based companies had proportionately fewer than did the regional companies: at English National Opera, the House singers represented 12% of the total; at the Royal Opera House, the figure was 8%.³⁴

4.7 Pressures on young singers

Many of those interviewed expressed their regret that the gradual disappearance of the type of support during the early professional years which enabled young singers to pace their development with some confidence, is creating pressures which are in no one's long-term interests. This point was elaborated so frequently that it seems important that attention is drawn to two particular aspects of the situation. The first relates to the pressure on young voices which can be created by 'medium scale' work; the second relates to the less obvious, but no less real, pressure to achieve 'instant success'.

(i) Medium-scale work

Many of those interviewed expressed concern that young singers are being overstretched by undertaking too much 'medium scale' work too early. Examples were quoted of young singers participating in long runs of performances in 1000-

³³ There has not been opportunity within the Review to give adequate consideration to the impact of EC legislation, or to the opportunities and challenges which this provides for training as well as for professional openings for young singers in the early years of their careers.

³⁴ Percentages derived from statistics provided by companies.

seater theatres, such as with English Touring Opera.³⁵ It was suggested that for many singers, more experience of truly small-scale work with limited orchestral resources or piano, performing in venues of 500 seats or less, would be more beneficial. Some of the opportunities available within summer courses and small companies are of this kind.³⁶ However, in the absence of House Principal contracts, it is easy to understand why medium-scale opportunities such as these are often keenly sought by young singers, for they offer experience which, in terms of scale, is likely to extend the performance experience which they have gained at Music Colleges.

(ii) 'Instant success'

Many of those interviewed as part of the Review commented that expectations about the point at which gifted young singers should be able to demonstrate real vocal maturity seem to have been changing, and to have moved in a direction far from helpful for the real nurturing of talent. Some remarked that there seems now to be an assumption that a young singer should be fully equipped for professional life on graduation from Music College. This expectation, coupled with the external pressure in today's society to achieve instant success and the tendency to value the 'novelty factor' above more traditional attributes of experience and vocal maturity, has produced a potentially dangerous trend in the pacing of young singers' development. Young singers are faced by a widening range of opportunities. Most are well aware of the desire of the companies to attract new audiences by engaging the latest new name and the tendency of some producers to cast ever younger, more attractive singers. The pressures of a materialistic society are ever-present. In these circumstances, the temptation for young singers to accept work for which they are not yet ready, is difficult to resist.

4.8 Summary of key factors affecting the second phase of professional development

The preceding paragraphs in this section of the report have attempted to set out the key factors which have emerged in this Review as having a significant impact on the professional development for young singers in the first five years of their professional careers. Seen from the viewpoint of the young singer, they can be summarised as:

- * less coaching and assistance with learning of repertoire now available because of the reduction in the number of House Principal contracts
- * wider range of freelance opportunities with more responsibility for shaping own career
- * absence of company support in structuring and pacing a career

³⁵ English Touring Opera is addressing this issue at the moment and may introduce a separate chorus to avoid principals in heavy roles being required to sing in the chorus on alternate nights.

³⁶ Cf. paragraphs 2.2, 5.3.

- * benefits/risks of chorus experience
- * pressure of medium-scale tours
- * pressure to achieve 'instant success'

These factors have been considered in formulating the recommendations which conclude this report.

5 FILLING THE GAPS

A central concern of this Review has been to consider how singers can best be supported for the new situations in which they may find themselves. In the absence of the type of support previously provided to many young singers by continued employment with an opera company, the importance of advice from other quarters is proportionately greater. This section identifies three categories of people whose contribution to the support of young singers has increased in potential significance.

5.1 Agents

As a result of the wider range of opportunities available to young singers and the tendency for young singers to be self-employed rather than on contract with one House, most feel the need to enlist the services of an agent. It was evident from the discussion that the majority of young singers placed more importance on having an agent rather than on first reaching the point where additional help was required in order to manage and prioritise the work which was on offer. Among the young singers canvassed, there was a tendency to assume that if an agent could be obtained then work would follow.

Members of the opera companies were among those who expressed reservations about the advice given by certain agents to young singers. Many felt that agents should be more rigorous in advising young singers to refuse inappropriate work or roles and tours which might have a detrimental effect. Not surprisingly, however, it was argued by agents and others that company managements should also demonstrate their commitment to young singers' long-term development by taking a responsible attitude to the offers which they make, since it can be very difficult to persuade a young singer to refuse what may appear to be an ideal career opportunity.

5.2 Teachers

Generally speaking, young singers retain a relationship with their singing teachers during their early professional careers. Given the diverse and often rootless nature of freelance employment, this contact can be critically important to the singer's long-term vocal health and sense of personal identity. In some cases, however, the teacher may be overprotective, while not necessarily being in touch with changes in the profession as a whole. Some of those interviewed commented that teachers who have no regular contact with opera companies or with the work of Music Colleges may not be fully aware of current developments and demands, particularly in approaches to production. There was strong support for a forum which brought singing teachers into regular discussion with each other and with conductors, producers and artistic staff of the main companies. Many felt that the benefits from regular dialogue could extend well beyond the areas which fall within the remit of this Review.

5.3 Providers of Summer Courses

There is an increasing number of summer opportunities³⁷ for young singers both in Britain and abroad, most of which include specialist coaching and culminate in a production. In some cases, singers are paid at professional rates; in others, the opportunity takes the form of a short course, with the singers who are selected receiving free tuition and residential expenses from the organisation concerned.

In Britain, these opportunities include British Youth Opera, The Britten-Pears School, Clonter Opera Farm, Broomhill Opera, Garsington Opera and Dartington International Summer School, in addition to the annual seasons at Buxton and Glyndebourne. Some of these openings are in no sense limited to those who have already completed their formal training: many of those who apply, do so while in formal education. However these, and various other small companies which operate throughout the year, provide opportunities for performance, coaching and career advice which can be of particular value to aspiring soloists. These openings are keenly sought, particularly where the coaching and performance support is of a high quality. Many of the summer course opportunities appear to have emerged relatively recently, partly as a response to the perceived needs of talented young singers for structured and professionally demanding challenges during that second phase - the early years of establishing a career. It would seem that their potential contribution to the wider spectrum of training and development for young singers has yet to be fully realised.

³⁷ Some (but not all) of these fall within the category discussed in paragraph 2.2.

6 WAYS FORWARD

The recommendations outlined below focus on the training and professional development of young singers during the first five years of their careers:

- 1 That the regular communication regarding auditions which already occurs between the Music Colleges and the major professional companies should be extended to include annual dialogue on a formal basis regarding the needs of the profession and the opportunities sought by the Colleges for their graduates. This should include an opportunity for dialogue between singing teachers and members of the music staff of the opera companies.
- 2 That a forum should be identified within which formal dialogue can be developed between those wishing to contribute specifically to the professional training of young singers beyond the completion of their formal education. This forum should have responsibility for encouraging more effective co-ordination between those seeking funding for this work, by stimulating debate about the appropriateness of the range of experience available and its sequencing.

Both 1 and 2 might be organised by the Arts Council as part of the work of the National Opera Co-ordinating Committee.

- 3 That the forum described above should be (i) responsible for keeping under review the implications for advanced opera training of national developments in training and (ii) in a position to advise on the accreditation of training and, as appropriate, on funding sources.
- 4 That support should be given for the development of in-company training schemes for young singers.

A young singer sponsored by one of the companies to attend the National Opera Studio could, for example, be offered a three-year contract with the company, of which the National Opera Studio year could be the first. This would be, in effect, a renaissance of the Company Principal concept, but designed for the Young Principal in particular. During this period of attachment to the company, the young singer could be given experience of a wide range of work with the company, such as cover roles, chorus, education and community activity and small parts.

- 5 That the Arts Council should encourage, by links with funding, the work of those organisations which seek to provide young singers with experience of staged work from the early music and contemporary repertoires.

- 6 That the Arts Council should establish a bursary scheme (as a strand of a fund such as the Arts Council's Artists' Research and Development Fund) for young singers during the first five years after the completion of formal training.

This would enable young singers to benefit from short courses of specialist coaching/tuition either in Britain or abroad, in relation to particular repertoire or types of work for which they were beginning to obtain engagements.

- 7 That opera companies should be encouraged to develop more flexible contracts for choristers, to reduce the risk that chorus work is viewed by aspiring soloists as a cul-de-sac.
- 8 That all parties involved with young singers should endorse the importance for the majority of young singers of carefully-paced development, and should aim to avoid generating false expectations by encouraging over-exposure during the early years of their professional careers.
- 9 That the appraisal of the National Opera Studio should be informed by careful study of the recommendations of the Willatt Report and the arguments which produced them.
- 10 That the appraisal of the National Opera Studio should take particular account of the changes in the length, level and content of the postgraduate opera courses now available at British Music Colleges.
- 11 That support be provided for further systematic investigation, through case studies and longitudinal studies, of the relationships between professional training and career patterns among young singers now becoming established in the professional world.