JULIAN BUDDEN

Julian Medford Budden
1924–2007

JULIAN BUDDEN, the finest scholar of nineteenth-century Italian opera of his generation, died in Italy on 28 February 2007. He will be remembered for his achievements as a producer at the BBC, for his broadcasts and reviews, and above all for his books on Verdi and Puccini. Indeed, his passing leaves a huge gap in the field of opera studies. His books have for several decades been a constant point of reference for scholars, performers and simple music-lovers; but he was also an active presence, a scholar on whom one could always rely for original contributions, for opinions, and also for advice on a myriad topics. An utterly unique figure in the world of musical studies, Julian's intelligence and cultivation created in some ways a perfect incarnation of that now rare specimen, the British 'connoisseur': someone who was an unassailable specialist in his chosen field, but who never lost sight of the need to communicate his enthusiasms and knowledge to the wider world.

Julian was born in Hoylake, near Liverpool, on 9 April 1924, the only child of Lionel Budden, a Professor of Architecture at Liverpool University, and Maud Budden (née Fraser), an Edinburgh-born writer of children's verse and regular contributor to the *Liverpool Echo* (she was the literary side of the Curley Wee cartoon character, and an impressive archive of her achievements was preserved in her son's London flat to the day he died). Julian was educated at Stowe, and then, in 1942, went to Queen's College, Oxford, to read Classics. Declaring himself a Conscientious Objector, he was assigned to the Red Cross and worked in the Friends Ambulance Unit from 1943 to 1946, serving both in Italy and Austria. Returning to Queen's after the war, he took his BA in 1948, and

Proceedings of the British Academy, **153**, 115–122.

then studied piano and bassoon at the Royal College of Music, where his teachers included Archie Camden, Patrick Hadley and C. T. Lofthouse.

In 1951 he started at the BBC, where he remained for his entire working life. His first post was as a clerk and script editor (although he found time to earn a B.Mus. from Trinity College in 1955); he then rose through the ranks to become a producer (1956–70), Chief Producer of Opera (1970–6) and finally External Services Music Organizer (1976–83). Julian's time at the BBC might now seem like a golden age for opera: little-known works were produced regularly, there were numerous broadcasts from elsewhere in Europe, and he was personally responsible for many important revivals, for instance the resurrection of a number of Verdi's more obscure titles (including the original versions of *Macbeth*, *La forza del destino* and *Simon Boccanegra*)—and this was in the 1970s, when such explorations were bold indeed. The revivals were groundbreaking in their time and, as the recent Opera Rara reissues demonstrate, hold up very well even today.

Remarkably, though, Julian's work at the BBC continued in tandem with a second occupation as a writer on music. At first this *deuxième carrière* took the form of articles and reviews for the *Listener* and other publications; but in the 1970s and early 1980s it flowered into his monumental three-volume study, *The Operas of Verdi* (London, 1973, 1978, 1981). It is difficult to overestimate the effect these books have had. Their scholarship was impeccable and in many instances entirely original: no source, however obscure, was overlooked; and the assessments of Verdi's literary source material, whether in French, German, Italian or English, were always fresh, with a formidable cultural background worn lightly.

Two aspects of Julian's background were likely to have been fundamental to his scholarly achievement. The first was the fact that he had read Classics at Oxford, an experience that gave his scholarship and research a firm base in the Humanities (in the broadest sense of that often abused term). The second was his career in BBC Radio. His post as Chief Producer of Opera ensured that his interests in and knowledge of the operatic repertoire were by no means restricted to the nineteenth-century Italian repertory. Julian's office during this period could be an education indeed. Typically he would have by him a complicated forward schedule of recordings and broadcasts, among which one could find not just operas never before broadcast but often works of whose existence one was completely unaware. Frequently, Julian himself had rediscovered these pieces: he studied them at the piano, and when he thought it worth the trouble, he programmed their performance; he had, quite simply,

become convinced of their cultural importance and had the enormous good fortune to be employed by an institution that had the resources to realise them at a high level. And the operas thus revived would remain in his formidable musical memory, constituting a basis from which he would then, in his books and elsewhere, trace parallels, find analogies, and speculate about the origins of one style in another.

This broad purview led to a quality of operatic scholarship that was virtually unequalled. Julian's first Verdi volume, covering the operas from *Oberto* (1839) to *Rigoletto* (1851), came out in 1973, at a time when in the UK Verdi's early operas were by no means universally respected among musicians who thought of themselves as 'educated'. Julian somehow managed to communicate the force of these still rather alien works by looking at them within their broadest cultural and musical context. (Quite how he did this so unfailingly must remain a mystery: certainly it was a result of all those years at the BBC, listening closely to the operatic repertoire that surrounded Verdi; but his extraordinary ability to understand operas on the basis of their vocal scores, drawing from them their potential for drama, was a very rare talent indeed.) More than this: Julian's writerly personality was uncommonly welcoming and generous: generous to his hero Verdi, of course; and to past scholars who had tried to understand him; and also—most importantly—generous to his readers. His prose was full of wit and relaxed communication, never for a moment striving merely to impress.

More needs to be said about these remarkable books. What characterised them? Julian had a seemingly inexhaustible knowledge of his chosen historical period, in particular those years in which Verdi flourished: so much so that he could move effortlessly between historical and artistic matters, and then—closing in on his objects—between musical and dramaturgical ones. He had read more-or-less everything on the topic, scholarship and criticism both of the past and the present, but right from the start he formulated a method all of his own for dealing with Verdi's oeuvre. In his three volumes, discussion of biographical matters and the genesis of a work always preceded discussion of the opera, which was, Ernest Newman-style, taken scene by scene. But this separation never seemed artificial, chiefly because of the flexibility of Julian's prose and his communicative manner. In particular the scene-by-scene format, in which plot and musical unfolding would emerge together and seamlessly, became in Julian's hands a formidable analytical instrument: one in which the most complex matters of musical organisation could be essayed with assurance but never needless ostentation. All of this was presented

to the world in prose of considerable elegance, constantly enriched by cultural references, principally (though not exclusively) from English literature. It was a prose style that—when the subject matter called for it—could also be enlivened by a sense of humour, something that made (and still makes) reading his books such a great pleasure, whether the reader is an opera specialist or simply someone with a love of opera.

His best formulations are, in this respect, almost infinitely quotable, but a couple of passages will at least give a flavour of one of his many registers. The first comes from near the end of his first volume. After a chapter of thirty pages discussing the genesis and the music of *Rigoletto*, Julian (as always) closed with a masterly summing-up. We can quote only a part of it:

> No other opera, it is sometimes said, maintains such a perfect balance between lyrical and dramatic elements; no other is so well proportioned, so tightly crammed full of ideas precisely arranged and organically related to the whole. Certainly it was a long time before Verdi surpassed it in the operas to come in that density of invention so organized as to cheat the clock. Again, Beethoven's 'Eroica' comes to mind. But in one respect the parallel breaks down. The 'Eroica' established a bigger scale of musical thought than the symphony had ever known before, and one that Beethoven never exceeded until the Ninth and the last quartets. The scale of ideas in *Rigoletto* remains small. It is very much tied to the 16-bar melodic unit. Passages in freer time sooner or later require a symmetrical period to give 'composition' in the pictorial sense. There is an interesting contrast here with the mature Wagner. The first act of *Die Walküre*, possibly the most perfect single act he ever wrote, is built from small motifs worked into a huge scheme. But when in the 'Song of Spring' he introduces a formal, self-contained melody, the smaller organism obtrudes on the greater, and the general design suffers, if only slightly. Verdi in the Storm Scene of *Rigoletto* needs such a closed form, a quasi-cabaletta stated not once but twice, in order to carry the freer passages which follow it. (*The Operas of Verdi*, I, pp. 509–10)

There are many levels on which to praise this passage: for its elegance and economy; its unselfconscious breadth of reference; its absence of the least hint of strain in thinking of Verdi as comparable in seriousness of purpose and musical achievement to Beethoven or Wagner. But what seems most important is its grasp of the essential dynamics of an opera—the fact that a good part of what makes an opera work will have to do with how musical forms articulate dramatic time, and that this will be as much a rhythmic as a melodic phenomenon. To be sure, all is lightly worn: there are no footnotes to display elaborate reading; Julian wrote footnotes when they were required, not to impress others. But the quality of the

insights, the understanding of opera as theatrical communication, is as unmistakeable as it is remarkable.

Our second example comes at the parallel moment at the end of Julian's final volume. It is his summing-up not only of *Falstaff* (1893) but, boldly, of Verdi's entire career:

> As to why after a lifetime as Italy's leading composer of tragic melodrama Verdi should have chosen to close his career with a comedy, let us remember that his huge life-span covered an era of rapid change. He had grown up in the age of the stagecoach and candlelight; he died in the age of steam and electricity. He had seen empires rise and fall, ideals overturned, age-old beliefs blown away by events. He had seen the Risorgimento and the cause of Italian unity gathering force through the heroism of its leaders only to collapse in petty squabbles. He could have observed with Oscar Wilde that there is only one tragedy greater than being baulked of one's heart's desire, and that is attaining it. By his eightieth year he knew that nothing in this world can be taken for granted and that 'Man is born to be made a fool of'. That he was no mere destructive cynic; that, if no orthodox Christian, he thought seriously on first and last things and was capable of religious experience we know from the Requiem and the *Quattro Pezzi Sacri* that were his last compositions; but the final message of the secular Verdi is one of tolerance, comprehension and humour. If we cannot all agree we can at least laugh with each other and at ourselves. It is a message of hope. (*The Operas of Verdi*, III, p. 531)

One wonders both at and about this summing-up. Again, as always, there is the elegance and economy of expression, the breadth of learning. But here, unusually, there is also something else, another register, a 'something' that makes one speculate about whether these final pages of Julian's greatest achievement had a degree of personal resonance: were perhaps a moment in which this deeply private man felt he could finally express his own credo, his own sense of the world to which he had contributed so much.

Even now, decades after these books were written, we Verdi scholars and opera-lovers often return with pleasure to them, receiving from them not only fresh illumination but above all stimuli for further investigation. We might here recall in particular the attention Julian gave towards text declamation, an area of enquiry that before him had remained almost untouched in Verdi studies. As it happens, his earliest Verdian efforts were in this field: possibly the very first was at the international conference dedicated to *Don Carlos* (Parma, 1969), in which he tackled (quite possibly for the first time in the literature) the problem of Verdian declamation in relation to the peculiarities of French prosody, a relationship so important to the melodic style of that opera, and of the works that followed.

On the other hand, his continual reading of the scholarly literature (which was expanding alarmingly just as his books were emerging) also gave rise to new enthusiasms and angles of concentration. In this sense, the occasional differences in approach between the third volume and the earlier two could be significant: by the late 1970s, he had, for example, become influenced by the attention given by others to the so-called 'disposizioni sceniche' (contemporary production books), some of which were becoming available in facsimile; in part through this new strand of scholarship, he became more concerned with the visual aspect and the power of scenic spectacle, and applied it to his arsenal of approaches, in the process virtually inventing an idea of 'scenic analysis' that has now become commonplace.

Julian took early retirement from the BBC in 1983, just after his Verdi trilogy had come to an end, and decided to divide his time between his modest flat in London and a home outside Florence. From then on, the world of Italian opera, and the country that had created it, became a daily reality: close to trusted friends and with the chance to travel to Lucca, or to Parma and the library of the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani. He became a feature of the Italian operatic scene in his role (by no means self-consciously assumed) as *un vero* gentleman *inglese*. His Italian was extraordinary: the elegance of expression and command of the lexicon were praised by the most discriminating of judges, and the fact that he continued to deploy these skills within a resolutely English cadence was both part of him, and part of the charm. His books were translated into Italian and immediately became classics, inspiring a younger generation of Italian Verdians. In 1987 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy, and in 1991 was awarded the OBE.

During his last years, Julian devoted much of his attention to the other dominant figure in later nineteenth-century Italian opera: Puccini. He served loyally and conscientiously as President of Lucca's Centro di studi Giacomo Puccini until his death, and in that position did much to promote scholarship on the composer in Italy. The magisterial monograph he dedicated to Puccini's life and works appeared in 2002, and is full of new directions (*Puccini: His Life and Works*: Oxford, 2002). Again the technique was the one he had made his own: a patient movement from biographical and documentary matters to musical interpretation. But with Puccini he had new challenges, not least in the greater surface complexity of the musical object, and a bewildering mass of biographical and musical information that had in many cases hardly been scratched, let alone sorted and analysed, by previous scholars. The fact that he man-

aged to complete the book at all, during a period in which his health was failing, is remarkable in itself; but the quality of the insights into the man and his music are, if anything, as least as impressive as those he lavished on Verdi.

This project, large-scale as it was, was hardly the only one that occupied Julian in his unusually productive retirement, or that aroused his ever-vigilant curiosity. In the March 2007 number of *Opera* magazine, for example, there appeared, posthumously, a review by him of the English translation of Pietro Melograni's book on Mozart. And so we might remember him: active to the last, always open to new cultural departures and at the same time careful in his judgements; always available for consultation, for dialogue and advice. What is more, there was no sense that Julian's Verdian activity came to a halt with his magnificent three volumes. He condensed and revised his three-volume *Verdi* into a Master Musicians volume (Oxford, 1985), one that also allowed him to round out his Verdian journey with fine insights into the *Messa da Requiem* and the late religious pieces. He was a member of the Editorial Board of the Verdi complete edition and, from the moment it was constituted, became a valued and active member of the Comitato Scientifico of the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani in Parma, in particular serving on the jury that awarded the Rotary Club Prize 'Giuseppe Verdi'.

The list of his latter-day activities could continue. Julian worked for two years with Marcello Conati and Pierluigi Petrobelli as supervisory editor of the full score of the *Messa per Rossini*, which, unpublished at the time of its composition, received its world premiere at Stuttgart in September 1988. With an interest matched only by the enthusiasm with which he accepted the task, Julian also translated into English the entire Introduction and Critical Commentary of Fabrizio Della Seta's monumental transcription and critical edition of the sketches for *La traviata* (Chicago, 1997). And again, Julian contributed for five years to the course in *drammaturgia musicale* created and sponsored by the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani at the Facoltà di Lettere at the Università di Parma. One of his comments during that course sticks in the mind, so characteristic is it of his entire approach to scholarly matters: 'Beh, con Verdi c'è sempre qualche cosa di nuovo da dire.' And perhaps in this simple, unassuming phrase lies the key to understanding whence his constant energy and commitment arose.

This, then, was Julian Budden, the expert, the scholar, the distinguished author. And then, of course, there was Julian Budden the man; a friend with whom one could converse with the greatest of pleasure, especially

when one wished to test out a scholarly hypothesis or some new idea. Julian's breadth of reference and acuteness of judgement would unfailingly be on offer in these more informal contexts, ensuring that the topic would always be enriched and clarified after it had passed across his mental horizon. Admittedly, the inner man was harder to know. Particularly in later years, he could for example sometimes cut a lonely figure at the social jamboree of conferences and other large meetings; he could become isolated and bored; meals became an important sign of progress through the day, and were sometimes impatiently awaited. But there were always people who enjoyed the chance to spend time with him, and this was because the generosity that so characterises his writing also characterised the man. Those of us who worked on Verdi in England during the 1970s and 1980s, and then in Italy in later years, came to owe him an enormous debt: for his books, of course; but also for the way in which he welcomed younger scholars unselfishly into his Verdian world, recommending them to broadcasters and editors when many an established figure would simply have guarded his patch. What is more, and to his great credit, Julian suffered the passing fashions of musicology with admirable patience, and with not a hint of position-taking or defensive polemic. We hope he did this for the very best of reasons, because he already sensed something important: that his books were becoming models of how to write about opera and that, because of this, they would never grow old.

Julian Budden, writer, Verdi expert, scholar, friend and so much more, now rests in peace in a little cemetery outside Doccia, in the undulating Tuscan hills, in the shade of a large cypress tree. He was a trusted comrade during his long and productive life; his memory will remain with us and with the community of opera scholars for whom he did so much.

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