

Edgar Evans - Extempore

An e-book version of the biography of Edgar Evans, the principal tenor at the Royal Opera (1946 – 1975) and, later, a teacher at the Royal College of Music



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I am also grateful to have been able to quote from the following books:

- *'Opera Biographies' (published by Werner Laurie, 1955)*
- *'Mr Showbusiness, the autobiography of Vic Oliver' (published by George G Harrap & Co Ltd, 1954)*
- *'Erich Kleiber, a Memoir by John Russell (published by Andre Deutsch, 1957)*
- *'The Quiet Showman', the biography of David Webster by Montague Haltrecht (published by Collins, 1975)*
- *'A Knight at the Opera' by Sir Geraint Evans (published by Michael Joseph, July 1984), along with several newspapers' and periodicals' comments on Edgar Evans and his achievements.*

Edgar Evans wanted to publicly record his grateful thanks to the Rev Goronwy Evans, a Unitarian minister in Cardiganshire, who championed Edgar Evans' career over many years, writing about him in newspapers, magazines and books and also arranging for Edgar to feature in radio and television programmes.

Robert Little,

November 2005; revised March 2012

Dedication from Edgar Evans:

To Nan and Huw – and to my mother, Margaret, who believed in me vocally and encouraged me to go on.

What the reviewers said

‘...the story told by the tenor is pretty straightforward, often revealing, always interesting and, in a way, a history of how opera was done in those days... I can only wish more books of this kind were written.’

Rudi van den Bulck, Opera Nostalgia.

‘There are fascinating nostalgic insights into Covent Garden and its diffuse personalities... there is wit and waspishness, generosity and envy... I enjoyed it.’

Lyndon Jenkins, The British Music Society ‘News’.

‘This book contains previously untold tales of the Opera House.’

Western Mail.

‘Edgar Evans had come to opera by a series of fascinating accidents, all recounted in this thoroughly readable and anecdotal book... I loved it!’

Denby Richards, ‘Musical Opinion’ magazine.

Foreword by Keith Grant

There was a time when one of London's most exclusive clubs was to be found in a vast cellar in Covent Garden. This was the canteen of the Royal Opera House, located directly beneath the orchestra stalls. Here was the daily meeting place of a crowd of singers, dancers, orchestral players, extras and backstage staff. It was noisy (especially when opera singers were on call) and it was jolly. And it was almost certainly here, at a tableful of principal singers, that I would have met Edgar Evans, when I first came to Covent Garden.

At that time there was still a true resident opera company at the Garden.

Whereas nowadays there is but a constantly changing procession of principal guest artists, in 1962 and for a few years to come, there were some 40 principal singers on full-time contract. There were veterans like Edith Coates, Geraint Evans, John Lanigan and Otakar Kraus; artists at the peak of their career like Amy Shuard, Marie Collier, Josephine Veasey, Joan Carlyle, John Shaw, Kenneth Macdonald, Michael Langdon, Forbes Robinson, Joseph Rouleau and David Ward, and newcomers with everything to play for like Gwyneth Jones, Elizabeth Vaughan, Peter Glossop and (a little later) Margaret Price. Distinguished among the veterans was Edgar Evans.

In fact, Edgar was a member of the legendary team which was recruited in 1946 by David Webster and Karl Rankl to be the nucleus of the post-war opera company. Everything had to be built up from scratch, as the Opera House had, ignominiously, been serving as a dance hall throughout the war years. The Sadler's Wells Ballet (now The Royal Ballet) kept the curtain up for several months while their opera colleagues were getting their act together. The fledgling opera company eventually made its debut in Purcell's *Fairy Queen*, with Edgar in the cast.

By the 1960s the company had taken wing in a big way. Under the dynamic leadership of its music director, George Solti, it had won a place of honour among the top half dozen companies of the world.

I associate Edgar very much with the euphoria and camaraderie of this golden period. As I write, he is well into his 90s and I believe that he is the sole survivor among the principals of the original Covent Garden Opera Company. There were heroes in those days and we are now privileged to share the recollections of one of the best of them.

Keith Grant, General Manager of the Royal Opera Company and of the English Opera Group from 1962 to 1973 (written in 2005)

Introduction

It was with some trepidation that I approached The Royal College of Music one Wednesday evening in early October 1976.

For many years – since I was eight years old or so - I had enjoyed singing and had hoped that, once my voice had broken, I would be a tenor like my father. Moreover, ever since, as a 17 and 18 year old, I had sung a few solos in school concerts, I had wanted to have my voice trained so that I could be a professional singer.

As an economics undergraduate at University College, Cardiff, I had enrolled at the Welsh College of Music and Drama as a part time student.

There, I studied with Gerald Davies who, so I understood, had, in his time, sung at Covent Garden and Sadler's Wells. In fact, Gerald Davies had sung the small part of Goro in 'Madam Butterfly' at Covent Garden in 1937. Later, he became a principal tenor at Sadler's Wells.

Gerald Davies did his best for me but, when my university studies ended in the summer of 1976 and I got a job in Wembley Park, in north London, I asked him to recommend a singing teacher for me in the London area.

Unhesitatingly he recommended Edgar Evans – then recently retired as a principal tenor with the Royal Opera and currently teaching at the Royal College of Music in South Kensington.

I contacted Edgar and he asked me to come and sing for him at the College one evening, at the end of his 'teaching day'.

I was extremely nervous as I made my way into the College and up the stairs to his studio. I knocked on the door and, as bidden, entered.

I seemed to me to be a large room, containing a grand piano and a fairly grand man. Knowing Edgar to be – as Gerald Davies had called him – 'a real Welshman', I hoped to impress him by speaking in my very best (but not very fluent) Welsh.

After a few faltering exchanges – my Welsh wasn't up to the demands being made of it and Edgar could make neither head nor tail of what I was trying to tell him – he said: "Speak English."

I didn't mind that. What I did mind was having to sing for him.

Edgar accompanied me on the piano – playing chords rather than all the notes, while listening intently to the sounds I was making.

I sang 'Caro Mio Ben', by Giordano. It was obvious I was ill at ease.

"Don't be nervous!" Edgar exclaimed. "Just try your best. All of us can only ever do our best."

Not only was it good advice but it broke the ice and did the trick. I sang again. It was better but, even so, Edgar didn't seem as impressed as I had originally hoped.

"I'll give you six lessons," he said. "If you can't sing 'over' (the technique required for tenors to sing above an F) by the end of the sixth lesson, we'll call it a day. OK?"

I agreed. After all, he had agreed to teach me – albeit for a probationary period of six weekly lessons.

Thankfully, Edgar couldn't count. At the end of the sixth lesson, when I was still having some difficulty understanding the singing technique he was trying to give me, he said: "Do you want to come again next week?"

"Yes," I said.

That reply set the seal on a growing friendship that has lasted from that day to this.

I never did achieve my ambition of becoming a professional singer – although, with the vocal technique I culled from Edgar's teaching, I did (and still do) a lot of amateur and semi-professional singing and even gave two (unsuccessful) auditions for the Royal Opera in the very early 1990s. However, Edgar's teaching has brought me a deeper appreciation of vocal technique in singing, while

the friendship of Edgar and his wife, Nan, brought pleasure to my whole family over the years.

When my wife, Helen, and I were married – on Saturday 18th October 1980 – we asked Edgar to sing for us at the ceremony (while we went to sign the register). He protested that he had retired from singing in public – but, with characteristic generosity, agreed to sing.

His performance – of ‘Ombra mai fu’, otherwise known as the famous ‘Largo’ from Handel’s opera, Xerxes – was not only beautifully phrased and highly impressive but probably his last public performance on any stage.

As our professional relationship developed, it was easier for me – working in Wembley Park - to visit Edgar at his house in nearby Harrow, rather than go to the Royal College of Music.

Most of the time I brought him songs and operatic roles that were unknown to him in his professional career. They included sentimental Victorian ballads and Gilbert & Sullivan tenor roles. But, to each one, Edgar brought a thorough professionalism and a steely determination to teach me how best to convey the emotions of both the words and music.

Mine was not the only voice that he coaxed to achieve more than might otherwise have been expected of it. Many of his former pupils have made careers as professional singers in the UK and throughout Europe. These include Andrew Yates, Glyn McKay, Jane Kamargue, Marie Miller, David Rose, Bryan Secombe, a former principal singer with the D’Oyly Carte Opera Company before joining the Royal Opera; Gary Sutcliffe, who is with the English National Opera, and Philip Salmon, a tenor who has built an international reputation as a soloist.

Yet this is not their story. It is his.

In many ways, Edgar Evans’ story is remarkable, containing any number of unexpected twists and turns.

It is a far cry from being born and brought up on a farm in Cardiganshire in West Wales before the First World War to

becoming a principal tenor at the Royal Opera in Covent Garden immediately after the Second World War and on into the pre-Thatcherite world of the 1970s.

As in every career, chance meetings played their part. And, as in every successful career, so did a great deal of hard work – not all of it aimed specifically in the direction of music.

This is Edgar Evans' story as, principally, he told to it me over a number of visits to his house in Harrow in the early months of 2005. At the time, he was 92 years old and his memory was as bright and sharp as it had ever been when applied to learning an operatic role or, in earlier days, learning a new milk round while working for the Royal Arsenal Co-Operative Society.

Although it is Edgar's story, told in his own words from chapter two onwards, 'reported speech marks' are only used in this book to denote passages of dialogue - for the sake of easier reading and understanding.

I hope that you enjoy reading this book as much as I have enjoyed researching and writing it. I hope it offers some valuable insights not only into the psyche of the last surviving principal of the re-formed Royal Opera company in 1946 but also into the people and their ways of life– both musical and otherwise – of the inter-war years, the years of the Second World War and the post-war era.

Robert Little, November 2005; revised March 2012