

SOME MEMORIES OF BELINDA QUIREY

Brian Trowell

When Belinda Quirey died in late October of last year [1996], I suddenly realized that I had lost one of my earliest colleagues and collaborators, and surely one of the most colourful, unselfish and courageous. We had been less in touch since I gave up opera production and eventually moved from London to Oxford in 1988, and hardly at all after I acquired a slight disability which made travelling irksome. It was my loss. We had first met around 1960, when I was regularly staging operas and experimenting with the notion – then extraordinary – that pre-classical operas, in particular Handel's, ought to be regarded, not as so many dead and unopenable volumes on obscure shelves in the library, but as living and revivable works of art. First, though, we had to understand and re-create the forgotten aesthetic which had inspired them.

We mounted an annual series of productions at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts and Music in the University of Birmingham, where I was a lecturer, under the baton of Anthony Lewis. He was able to claim the loyalty of some remarkable young singers who were willing to perform for low fees – almost literally for a song: Janet Baker, Heather Harper, John Shirley-Quirk, Alexander Young and Donald McIntyre are only a few of those who went on to make distinguished names for themselves. We decided to stage Handel's Ariodante, with its dance-sequence of Dreams in which Marie Sallé had taken part. I asked around, trying to find a group of dancers with ideals like our own, and came across the Domenico Dance Ensemble, run by Wendy Hilton. They proved willing, and admirable to work with. One day at a rehearsal, Wendy asked if her teacher might come along, and so I first met Belinda Quirey.

If memory serves, it was at the old Bell Street Mission off the Edgware Road, where many small opera groups then used to rehearse. In marched Belinda, carrying a large bag, from which, in our coffee break, she produced a cornucopia of buns and other goodies, talking the while about the analogies between the difficulties of reconstructing Early Dance and those of reviving forgotten musical conventions. She had the manner of an Indian Army officer's widow (no offence to Jimmy, whom I met only once), and a wonderfully old-world way of accenting important words and syllables; but she spoke not so much of dance as of classical ideals in a more general sense, and their revival during the Renaissance and Baroque.

She was a highly literate person. She talked of her early years training with and demonstrating for Melusine Wood, and of the problem that Early Dance enthusiasts of the 1930s, 40s and 50s had had to face, in that musicologists had hardly begun to study or perform dance music. Its rather humble and functional nature was disregarded by comparison with Bach

cantatas or Monteverdi madrigals; yet the dancers needed the music to find the right style, the right steps, the right carriage. We found that we understood each other perfectly and could help to solve each other's problems, and so began a relationship which I found constantly inspiring.

Next year I engaged Belinda to undertake the choreography for Rameau's Hippolyte et Aricie, and this served to introduce her to Lina Lalandi and the Oxford Bach Festival, who invited our production to the Oxford Playhouse Theatre. When Lina opened up operations in London as the English Bach Festival, she used Belinda's skills a great deal, even transporting her work to Paris and Versailles; and so began her second flowering.

Her first flowering, as a dancer, had begun even before the second world war, when she had appeared on television, though only a few could afford TV sets in those days. (She was to return to the screen later with a fascinating series on Early Dance.) When we mounted Hippolyte, she had not quite decided to give up dancing herself, and proclaimed that she would perform the long Chaconne, the crown of the fifth-act sequence of dances. I had not expected this, and she said, even before I had responded, "Of course, you're anxious not to have an old hag dancing in your opera with a lop-sided face" (she had endured some kind of infection that had distorted the muscles) – "but it'll be all right, you'll see." And so it was all right, for she advanced downstage with such majesty and elegance that we thought of nothing except how the magnificent music was seeming to dance itself. Belinda had a unique way, so unerring was her artistic instinct, of making musical phrases lift themselves out of the orchestra-pit and move about the stage like dramatic characters, or lines in a living painting.

After that, I was expected to offer musicological advice towards her own attempts to revive Early Dance, and I did so very willingly. It was not always easy, as when I had to revise the music for Melusine Wood's dance tutors: the music that Miss Wood had relied on for her reconstructions of mediaeval and early Renaissance dances had on occasions been poorly edited, and some of my more authentic versions did not fit the duration of the step-sequences that she had evolved. In one case, I was able to adjust a genuine polyphonic Basse Dance of the late fifteenth century to her choreography by introducing a highly inauthentic repeat. But the excellent and determined ladies of the Historical Dance Branch of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, led by Phroso Pfister, had a tricky time adjusting their minds and sensibilities to what a Basse Dance really was – in music, that is – namely a series of long equal notes in the tenor, over and around which free counterpoints frisked about. They wanted to dance treble phrases, and here they were having to learn how to count durations in a lower part. As I played the piano, with Belinda counting aloud, I was reminded of Nijinsky frantically shouting numbers at the first performance of The Rite of Spring. But we worked it out, and the Basse Dance became an artistic experience in the end; and I, in return, learned that Early Dance was not what balletomane friends had described it as, 'walking in time to the music'.

Belinda's response to that insult was to define Romantic ballet –

'so-called classical ballet' – as 'doing obviously difficult things, slightly out of time with the music'; and I realized why I had grown impatient with ballet-dancers myself – they never landed on the beat. Belinda taught me, too, what a problem was posed, in reviving old styles of dance, by the loss of what she called 'synaesthesia' between dancers and audience. For the audience in a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century theatre was watching stylized versions of dances which they themselves danced in society, and could feel the dancers' movements along their own muscles. Can we today ever hope to understand Mozart's music without the shared sense of motion and carriage and poise ?

Belinda expressed herself very sharply sometimes, as pioneers will – too often disappointed, kept out – and in print too, so that she could make even well-intentioned people nervous. An article on Early Dance that she wrote for The New Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians was never printed; but we are lucky to have a good deal else from her trenchant and stylish pen. She could also be impatient with others concerned in the Early Dance revival. After a gawky demonstration at Goldsmiths' College by an American whose centre of gravity was in the wrong place, she turned to me and said, "My dear, she danced like a Ph.D.!"

Her fierce sense of aesthetic propriety and beauty could even be repelled by early, primary authorities that she thought wrong-headed. When I told her that my pupil Pamela Jones, now back in her native Canada, was working on the dance-tutor of Cesare Negri, she snorted out "dreadful, fussy, frilly little man". When I pointed out that in one of Camargo's famous portraits the great dancer was wearing rather high-heeled shoes, she said, "That's just pure vanity: the little show-off can't have danced in them." She never forgave Sallé and Camargo for adulterating the noble style with 'lower-class tumblers' leaps'.

She choreographed many operas for me when I left Birmingham, mostly student productions for the Guildhall School of Music & Drama or King's College London. We had very little money to play with, so she would do it for free, or for her fares. Once, when we could not afford proper petticoats for Purcell's Dido and Aeneas, she went out and bought material for ten petticoats herself, and refused to be paid for them. Her capacious bag was much in evidence when students were involved, and many were the buns and sandwiches dispensed to the poor dears who didn't eat properly. She once told me how she had pressed rolls and coffees, and finally some money, on a little man connected with some group she was teaching, who looked lamentably thin. "No, thank you, Belinda," he said, but she urged him again. "Do take it." "No, Belinda, I don't need it." She insisted further. "Belinda, I have money! ..." "Oh, do come along, now, take it! ..." "Belinda, you don't understand, I have a lot of money. I'm very, very rich" – it turned out she was trying to forcefeed a millionaire.

Towards her seventies she became decidedly impatient when listening to or watching things that did not meet with her approval, and would speak out rather loudly during lectures or performances. My own nephew, the actor Guy Masterson, then at drama school, was playing Ulysses in a scene from

Troilus and Cressida, for a director who had decided to enliven what he thought was a dull character by asking him to adopt a speech defect and pretend to have trouble pronouncing his 'r's. Belinda taught Early Dance at the school in question, and was seated near the front of the audience. Guy was delivering the great speech on social order and in fine flow:

'Take but degwee away, untune that stwing,
and hahk what discawd follows ...'

— at which point he was interrupted by a majestic stentorian bellow from Belinda, "Hee-ah, hee-ah!" It stopped the show, as she knew it would, and I hope it taught the director a lesson.

Through Belinda I learned a lot about dance and dancers, but also about music. She always developed a wonderful rapport with singers. When staging an opera, I used to ask her to work with the singers too, so that there was not too great a difference between their movements and those of the dancers. The singers profited from a better stance, and some even realized that they were singing better. A chorus of singers, in Dido and Aeneas — that little miracle of a dance-opera — would be musically transformed by feeling the rhythms of what they sang working through their whole bodies.

Besides our practical collaboration, Belinda also undertook a little academic teaching for us at King's College, but sooner or later the chairs would be pushed to one side, and the historical lecture would turn into a dance for all. I remember witnessing one such transformation through a glass door. My utterly un-physical colleague, the late Tom Walker, stiff as a post, had managed to escape by grabbing the role of pianist, but there was the dignified Professor Pierluigi Petrobelli, now the doyen of Verdi scholars, solemnly joining the line of students and finding himself unexpectedly dancing a hay with an expression in which astonishment was succeeded by dawning enlightenment and eventually understanding and pleasure.

Astonishment, enlightenment, understanding and immense pleasure: that was also my own experience of Belinda. I miss her deeply.