

**Minehead Choral Society**  
**Program Notes**  
**A Night at The Opera - April 2011**

Welcome to a night of glitz, glamour and indulgence! For this concert the Minehead Choral Society are proud to present an evening of shamelessly well known and deservedly popular opera choruses and arias. Departing from our usual programme (and dress code!), we invite you to sit back and enjoy some of the greatest tunes from around the world.

As one critic of the musical stage said : “Opera is where a guy gets stabbed in the back, and instead of dying, he sings!” Often these final moments are a group affair, as scores of singers come onstage to share the passion of grand opera with the "dying" soloist. Opera choruses provide some of the most memorable melodies in all of music.

This selection is taken from a collection of choruses assembled and arranged by John Rutter, a very familiar composer to the society. He has translated the original language of the libretto, however I am very proud to say that the society members will be performing all of tonight’s works other than the Borodin in their original language. (Having tackled French, Italian, German and English, we took a rain-check on the Russian!). One of the hardest aspects of tonight’s performance is moving from one language to another and I would like to say a huge thank you to our singers for their commitment to mastering the languages, and their friends for helping them – the mutterings around Minehead have been most effective!

I am delighted to welcome our two soloists from the Guildhall School of Music, soprano **Eleanor Laugharne** and tenor **Stuart Laing**. Together with joining in the choruses, they will each present one of their favourite arias. We also welcome our friends from the **Taunton Sinfonietta**, we have joined together for several concerts now and look forward to our continuing partnership.

I would sincerely like to thank Sue Donovan, our rehearsal accompanist for her time and effort in supporting us over the past few weeks, and to Chris **Pereira** for stepping in as needed! Huge thanks to both of you.

*Marcus Capel, April 2011*

**Programme:**

1.	Rossini	The Thieving Magpie Overture	Orchestra
2.	Bizet	Habanera (Carmen)	Soprano solo, SATB
3.	Verdi	Triumphal Scene (Aida)	SATB, TTBB
4.	Leoncavallo	Bell Chorus (Pagliacci)	SATB
5.	Tchaikovsky	Lensky’s Aria (Eugene Onegin)	Tenor Aria
6.	Purcell	Dido’s Lament (Dido and Aeneas)	Soprano solo, SATB
7.	Wagner	Pilgrim’s Chorus (Tannhauser)	TTBB
8.	Verdi	Anvil Chorus (Il Trovatore)	SATB
INTERVAL			
9.	Strauss	Die Fledermaus Overture	Orchestra
10.	Puccini	Humming Chorus (Madame Butterfly)	Sopranos and Tenors
11.	Donizetti	Chorus of Wedding Guests (Lucia)	Tenor Solo, SATB
12.	Wagner	Bridal Chorus (Lohengrin)	SATB
13.	Strauss	Laughing Song (Die Fledermaus)	Soprano Aria
14.	Borodin	Polovstian Dances (Prince Igor)	Bass solo, SATB
15.	Verdi	Chorus of Hebrew Slaves (Nabucco)	SATB
16.	Verdi	Brindisi (La Traviata)	Soprano solo, Tenor Solo SATB

### **1. Overture: The Thieving Magpie (la Gazza Ladra), Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868)**

The Thieving Magpie was the second of three operas Rossini completed in 1817, and it received its first performance in May at La Scala, Milan. The opera may be described as a melodrama cum comedy, and the long cast list includes a talking magpie, whose utterances initiate the plot whereby a serving girl is accused of stealing a silver spoon and whose cause isn't helped by her father being accused, in his turn, of desertion from the army. Happily, by the final curtain all has been resolved.

The overture opens with a three bar side drum roll (Rossini's original score required a drummer to be placed on each side of the stage). What follows may be regarded as a synthesis of the ensuing plot. The opening *maestoso marziale* in 4/4 leads into the 3/4 *allegro*, whose principal theme is taken directly from a duet in Act II.

This overture, which is a brilliant orchestral tour-de-force, tells its own dramatic tale even detached from its opera.

### **2. Habanera (Carmen), Georges Bizet (1838-1875)**

Bizet was in many respects a tragic figure: A true prodigy, studying at the Paris Conservatoire at age 9; a pianist whom Liszt declared his own equal; friend of Gounod, Fauré, Saint-Saëns, Dubois, Massenet, and Offenbach, among others; enormously productive-- at least eight operas or dramatic works, overtures, a symphony, some 50 songs, a score of piano works, and countless transcriptions of other composers' orchestral works for piano; and dead at age 36, exactly three months after the premiere of his greatest opera—probably the best-known opera in the world, *Carmen*, set in a city and country he never visited (Seville, Spain).

*Carmen* was based on an 1845 novelette by Prosper Mérimée, and the libretto was the work of Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, the latter a cousin of Bizet's wife. Bizet based his *Habanera*—the name identifies a dance supposed to originate in Havana, Cuba— on what he thought to be a folk song; it actually was written by Iradier, a Spanish composer. In the opening scene, Bizet has the gypsy Carmen, on break from her job at the cigarette factory, sing it to taunt the soldier Don Jose, just arrived for his guard duty. Her sultry song comparing love to a beautiful bird is punctuated by the chorus—almost as a Greek chorus-- with the refrain “Prends garde a toi!” (“Young man, take care!”) While setting the stage for the story of the good soldier driven mad with desire, Carmen's torch song also sets an eternal standard for sexiness and abandon.

### **3. Triumphal March (Aida), Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)**

Set in the ancient Egypt of the pharaohs and with a masterly combination of grand set-pieces, including the spectacle of its swaggering *Triumphal March*, and intimate scenes, *Aida* tells the story of the Ethiopian slave girl who finds that her lover and her father are on the opposite sides of warring nations. A love rival to her princess employer, she chooses to be buried alive with her lover Radames, rather than endure life without him. Commissioned for the opening of the Suez Canal, Verdi's *Aida* has been a staple of the repertory ever since its 1871 Egyptian premiere and is probably the greatest music ever written to celebrate an artificial waterway.

### **4. Bell Chorus (Pagliacci), Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857-1919)**

Pagliacci is the Italian word for clowns, a decidedly unique subject for grand opera. This opera is set in Calabria in the 1860s on the Feast of the Assumption and involves interplay between the dramatic activity of a group of comic actors and their real-life emotions, played out before a village audience and which ultimately end in tragedy. It compresses this tale of love, jealousy and revenge into two action-packed scenes. Villagers sing the *Bell Chorus* after welcoming a troupe of strolling players as bells toll to call worshippers to Vespers. Their singing imitates the sound of the chimes hurrying them off to church.

### **5. Lensky's Aria (Eugene Onegin), Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)**

The action of the opera unfolds over many years. Tatyana, a young bookish woman, having fallen in love with the worldly Onegin, writes him a passionate letter, which would have been considered scandalous in Russian society at the time. In the following scene, the Chorus of Peasant girls sing while they gather berries in the garden. Tatyana and Onegin meet and he rejects her advances. Years later, with Tatyana now a sophisticated married woman, when they meet again, Onegin fails to recognise her at first, but eventually falls in love with her. This time it is his turn to have his advances rejected as she steadfastly refuses to betray her husband.

This beautiful aria is taken from Act 2, where Lensky sings of his love for his fiancé, Olga, Tatyana's sister, as he waits for a reluctant duel with Onegin, his friend, having fallen out at Tatyana's name-day party.

### **6. Dido's Lament (Dido and Aeneas), Henry Purcell (1659-1695)**

After the sack of Troy, the Trojan prince Aeneas escapes. His ship is driven by storms to Carthage where he and Dido the Queen of Carthage fall in love. Unfortunately the Gods have other plans for Aeneas, who is to found a

new Troy in Italy (the future Rome). Dido is distraught, when she learns that she is to lose Aeneas, and dies after singing her *lament* (When I am laid in earth). As the opera closes, the chorus sing a final lament over her lifeless body (With drooping wings)

### **7. Pilgrim's Chorus (Tannhäuser), Richard Wagner (1813-1883)**

Tannhäuser has sinned, having dallied with the Venus in Venusberg, and goes with a group of Pilgrims to Rome to beg pardon from the Pope. His love, Elisabeth, awaits his return with his friend Wolfram. This chorus is sung as the Pilgrims return from Rome and opens with the beautifully atmospheric tenors and basses singing *piano* and gradually reaching its climatic "Halleluja" before dying away into the distance.

### **8. Anvil Chorus (Il Trovatore), Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)**

Our first half closes with this famous, rousing chorus from *Il Trovatore* (The Troubadour), from Verdi's middle period, produced in 1853. The Anvil Chorus from *Il Trovatore*, is probably the best known part of the opera. The setting is a gypsy camp in the mountains of Biscay. The rhythm is that of hammer strokes on anvils. The men begin: "Look! The vast sky is casting off its somber robe of night, just as a widow puts by at last her dark veil of mourning. To work -- take up the hammer! What can make a gypsy merry like his gypsy sweetheart?"

## ***INTERVAL***

### **9. Overture to Die Fledermaus, Johann Strauss (1825–1899)**

Our second half opens with this delightful overture, guaranteed to make you want to get up and dance! Johann Strauss, Jr. established himself as the first Austrian composer of Viennese operettas at the request of several theatre owners and managers in Vienna. The most popular of these is *Die Fledermaus* (*The Bat*), composed in 1873-1874. The story is a comic one of planned revenge for a humiliating practical joke which is complicated by the appearance of old lovers, mistaken identities and the double standard applied oftentimes to the flirtations of married couples. Strauss typically composed his operetta overtures as "preview" pieces, basing them on melodies from the operetta itself, and the Overture to *Die Fledermaus* is no exception. Most of the thematic material comes from Act I and the famous Waltz. The beautiful oboe solo and accelerating theme following it are the heroine's aria "So muß allein ich bleiben" lamenting her anticipated solitude when her husband goes off to serve a five-day jail sentence for a minor offense, and her tongue-in-cheek "sorrow" at his absence. In addition to the richness of the melodies and the clever use of them, the Overture displays Strauss's skill at orchestration, an aspect of his composition that won him compliments from colleagues such as Brahms and Verdi. Strauss conducted the first performance of *Die Fledermaus* at the Theater an der Wien on 5 April 1874.

### **10. Humming Chorus (Madame Butterfly), Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)**

Madama Butterfly was written in 1903 while Puccini was recovering from injuries suffered in an auto accident; the libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa was based on a 1900 play by the American David Belasco, alleged to have been based on a real event. The opera was a failure at its 1904 premiere at La Scala in Milan, but was revised and caught public fancy within the year, becoming one of Puccini's most admired works.

The "**Humming Chorus**" ends the second act of the opera; it serves as a lullaby for Suzuki, the servant of the geisha Cio-Cio-San ("Butterfly"), and for Butterfly's toddler, as the three wait through the night for the return of the American Lieutenant Pinkerton— Butterfly's husband, whom she has not seen in three years, and father of her child. Butterfly does not sleep, and the audience by this time knows that Pinkerton has brought an American wife, which will lead to Butterfly's suicide. Once again the music is the calm before the storm.

### **11. Chorus of Wedding Guests (Lucia di Lammermoor), Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848)**

In 1835, when Lucia premiered in Naples, Donizetti was the rising star of Italian opera. The libretto is by Salvatore Cammarano based on Sir Walter Scott's novel, "The Bride of Lammermoor", with the story set in Scotland in the late 1600's. Lucia is the sister of Enrico Ashton, Lord of Lammermoor; she is secretly in love with a rival peer, Edgardo, master of nearby Ravenswood. Enrico learns of the romance and resolves to break it up by marrying his sister to wealthy Lord Bucklaw. The plot almost succeeds; Edgardo is banished, and Lucia signs the wedding contract. This chorus has the wedding guests celebrating in the hall of Lammermoor Castle; the bridegroom sings his pledge to be one of them, then goes upstairs to join his bride while the celebration continues. The guests sing the jubilant chorus "**Per te d'immenso giubilo**" ("For you an immense joy") to celebrate the nuptials. This happy scene terminates when the priest Raimondo tells the horrified guests that Lucia has killed her husband and gone mad. The famous 'mad scene' follows, Lucia dies, and Edgardo, on learning this, kills himself to be with her in death.

### **12. Bridal Chorus (Lohengrin), Richard Wagner (1813-1883)**

Weddings seem to always attract trouble in opera, and this chorus, ironically used frequently in modern wedding ceremonies, is no exception. The happy couple, Elsa and Lohengrin, are being escorted into their bridal chamber immediately following their nuptials which represents the most joyous period of their ill-fated marriage.

### **13. Laughing Song (Die Fledermaus), Johann Strauss (1825–1899)**

*Having heard the famous overture at the start of this half of the concert, we now have this famous aria. Die Fledermaus* is based on a French comedy featuring particularly Parisian goings-on at an intimate supper party, it was adapted for Strauss with a typically Viennese ball as its centrepiece. At the ball Gabriel von Eisenstein, posing as the 'Marquis Renard', has been flirting outrageously with the young ladies at the party. His wife's maid Adele, posing as an actress named Olga, is spotted by von Eisenstein who remarks on her likeness to some lady-in-waiting he knows. She mockingly inquires if a lady-in-waiting ever possessed *her* figure, profile and dress. This is the popular *Laughing Song*.

### **14. Polovstian Dances (Prince Igor), Alexander Borodin (1833-1887)**

Prince Igor, which was incomplete on Borodin's death and was completed by Rimsky Korsakov and Glazunov, is rarely performed outside Russia. The action of the opera relates to an incident in 1185 during a conflict between Russia and the Tartars. Prince Igor is defeated and captured by Khan Konchak of the Polovtsi but manages to escape eventually.

The Polovstian dances were completed by Borodin before his death. They are much better known than the opera itself and are frequently performed in the choral version we sing tonight. In the opera the dances are performed by the slave dancers of the Khan to entertain the captive Prince Igor.

### **15. Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves (Nabucco), Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)**

This is arguably Verdi's most famous melody and was adapted by the Italians as a song of patriotism shortly after its premier at La Scala opera house in Milan. The words are a paraphrase of Psalm 137 when the Israelites lament the loss of their homeland as part of the story of the Jews living in Babylonian exile in 586 B.C.

### **16. Libiamo, (Brindisi) from La Traviata, by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)**

Our evening closes with this wonderful song, allowing our 2 soloists, the orchestra and the choir a final chance to sing and play together. Brindisi is a term for a toasting or drinking song. In this case, the toast is offered by young Alfredo to his hostess, Violetta, to whom he has just been introduced; privately, he thereafter confesses he has had a crush on her for over a year. The jolly mood of the party contrasts with what is to become a less-than-idyllic romance, as the audience soon begins to sense. The 1853 libretto by Francesco Piave is based on a story by Alexandre Dumas, and the locale is outside Paris in about 1840; but even in Verdi's time, liberties were often taken with the era.