

English National Opera choristers strike against job cuts

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Strike action by the 60 choristers at the English National Opera (ENO), forced the cancellation of the performance of Berlioz's opera, *The Trojan—The Capture of Troy*, at the London Coliseum on February 25.

A unanimous decision for strike action was taken after the chorus was informed by ENO that one third of their number was to be made redundant because of a financial crisis at the company. Future strikes will cause the cancellation of the British premier of *The Handmaid's Tale* on April 3, *Alcina* on April 16, *The Trojans of Carthage* on May 8 and *Tristan and Isolde* on May 24.

The proposed redundancies are part of an ENO business plan being discussed with the Arts Council of Great Britain. It has provoked the first all-out strike action organised by the choristers' union, Equity, since the television strike of the 1960s.

On hearing the news of the sackings, the chorus passed a resolution of no confidence in the management. They staged a series of protests, which included whispering their way through a dress rehearsal and picketing the Arts Council's office accompanied by Verdi's *Chorus of Hebrew Slaves*.

On the evening of the strike the chorus staged a free concert for their supporters at St Paul's church in Covent Garden. The church was filled to capacity with people standing at the back and sitting on the stairs. A large overflow audience, including opera director Jonathan Miller, stood outside in the cold straining to hear the performance of Verdi's *Requiem* from inside the church.

The chorus gave an inspired performance, expressing their defiance with fortissimos that nearly blew the roof off the church, to be followed by passages of lyrical beauty that demonstrated all the attributes that the singers are famous for.

Soloists Merilyn Hill-Smith, Susan Bickley, David Rendell and Ashley Holland were all ENO principals, who came to express their solidarity with the strikers. The

conductor was the former assistant chorus master at ENO, David Morgan. The standing ovation they all received was well deserved.

Before the performance, chorus spokesman David Dyer told the audience that ENO's plan to sack 20 choristers was an act of "cultural vandalism, which would rip the heart out of a great company. We still believe in Lilian Baylis's vision that Britain and London needs a full-time, fully staffed repertory company, performing in English and accessible to all. That is why we are here tonight. This is not a requiem for ENO, not yet. It's a wake-up call that loudly demands to be heard."

Lilian Baylis, together with her aunt Emma Cons, pioneered the provision of culture for the people of London at the beginning of the last century. She had a vision of a people's theatre and in 1912 obtained a license and began to stage performances of opera and Shakespeare on alternate nights. Her deeply held belief was that culture of the highest order should be available and could be appreciated by all. She was the driving force behind the establishment of the three great British companies—the National Theatre, the Birmingham Royal Ballet and English National Opera. The plan of the present board of ENO to decimate the chorus is inimical to everything she strove for.

The company has always upheld the high standards established by Baylis and is renowned throughout the world as a first class ensemble, with a permanent complement of singers and musicians. A 2001 production of Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress* listed 34 company principals, 80 musicians and 65 choristers. It is this continuity and teamwork that has contributed to making the ENO one of the finest opera companies in the world.

Despite the undoubted excellence of recent productions at the Coliseum, chairman of ENO board, Martin Smith, has described the ENO's financial condition as "chronically sick". He blames the crisis on the effects of

“September 11” on box office receipts. But attacks on wages and conditions began long before September 11, with the introduction in 1999 of annualised hours for some of the backstage staff.

A spokesman for the board recently told *Gramophone* magazine that redundancies were needed “across the whole company” and would include replacing some full-time with short-term contracts, and natural wastage. The current proposal to cut the full-time players to 68, with a further 23 part-time posts, has been condemned by the Musicians Union as an attempt to create a two-tier orchestra. The union is not ruling out the possibility of strike action.

Rumours about extensive cuts have been circulating since July 2002. Theatre tradeweekly the *Stage* reported last year that ENO chairman Martin Smith planned to close the Coliseum from June 2003 until September 2004, and employ only a skeleton staff during that period. Fears were also expressed that Smith wanted the company to perform at the Coliseum for just six months a year—enabling the venue to be rented out for the rest of the time. Finally, an announcement was made that the Coliseum would close for a £41 million refurbishment in June this year and reopen in January 2004.

Last July, ENO general director Nicholas Payne resigned from the company. It was widely believed that he was forced out because he refused to support Martin Smith’s plans.

Payne’s resignation provoked a letter to the *Times* newspaper, signed by three former managers of the ENO—David Pountney, a former director of productions, general director Peter Jonas and former music director Mark Elder. They condemned Payne’s forced departure and described the situation as “dangerous to the future of opera”.

Nicholas Payne was present at the performance of Verdi’s *Requiem*. He spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* afterwards and said the ENO’s business plan was “disgraceful”, “very, very wrong” and that the ENO board “needed their heads examining”.

Also among the audience at St Paul’s was Michael Casey, who recently retired after playing with the first violins in the ENO orchestra for 43 years. He said, “The management are seeking to break down the backbone of the company, the people who produce the goods.”

One member of the chorus said that a colleague had been disciplined for talking to the press. She said that singers were worried they would be forced to audition against each other. “How will they decide who should

stay and who should go? Will they get rid of the long-standing members or the new ones to save on redundancy pay?”

Hilary Michel, an Equity member in the audience, said that West End shows with depleted choruses looked and sounded ridiculous and if the plan goes ahead the ENO will finish up exactly the same.

James Bonner, a pensioner who is an ardent supporter of ENO, said, “To sing in English would not be seen as correct by the purists, but it attracts a big audience. How else can you get young people into the opera? The ENO board is displaying a rotten attitude. How would they decide who to sack?”

Demelza Stafford, a music student at the Guildhall School of Music, spoke of the difficulties facing young singers. She said that when she completes her course she would have debts of at least £20,000: “It is frightening to think of the future. There is not enough support for young singers. Many students get despondent and give up trying.”

Ian McGarry, the general secretary of Equity, insisted that the redundancies would save no more than £115,000 out of an annual turnover of £30.7 million. He said that the union normally advised its members to avoid strike action, which showed the importance of this strike. The union has called on the Arts Council to reject ENO’s business plan and has offered to discuss an alternative if the threatened redundancies are withdrawn. This has not been taken up. But by offering to produce an alternative business plan, Equity is signalling to ENO that a deal can be struck that will inevitably be at the expense of the singers.



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