

= Welsh National Opera =

Welsh National Opera (WNO) (Welsh : Opera Cenedlaethol Cymru) is an opera company based in Cardiff , Wales ; it gave its first performances in 1946 . It began as a mainly amateur body and transformed into an all @-@ professional ensemble by 1973 . In its early days the company gave a single week 's annual season in Cardiff , gradually extending its schedule to become an all @-@ year @-@ round operation , with its own salaried chorus and orchestra . It has been described by The New York Times as " one of the finest operatic ensembles in Europe " .

For most of its existence the company lacked a permanent base in Cardiff , but in 2004 it moved into the new Wales Millennium Centre , Cardiff Bay . The company tours nationally and internationally , giving more than 120 performances annually , with a repertoire of eight operas each year , to a combined audience of more than 150 @,@ 000 people . Its most frequent venues other than Cardiff are Llandudno in Wales and Bristol , Birmingham , Liverpool , Milton Keynes , Oxford , Plymouth , and Southampton in England .

Singers who have been associated with the company include Geraint Evans , Thomas Allen , Anne Evans , and Bryn Terfel . Guest artists from other countries have included Joan Hammond , Tito Gobbi and Elisabeth Söderström . Among the conductors have been Sir Charles Mackerras , Reginald Goodall , James Levine and Pierre Boulez . The company has been led since 2011 by David Pountney as chief executive and artistic director .

= = Background = =

Choral singing became increasingly popular in 19th @-@ century Wales , principally owing to the rise of the eisteddfod as a symbol of its culture . The first Welsh National Opera Company was formed in 1890 . A local newspaper commented that it was remarkable that " a race of people to whom vocal music is a ruling passion should not generations ago have established a permanent national opera " . The company gave performances of operas by the Welsh composer Joseph Parry in Cardiff and on tour in Wales . The company , predominantly amateur with some professional guest singers from the London stage , gave numerous performances of Parry 's Blodwen and Arienwen , composed in 1878 and 1890 respectively . An American tour was planned , but the company folded , and Parry 's final opera , The Maid of Cefn Ydfa , was given at Cardiff by the Moody @-@ Manners Opera Company in 1902 .

A Cardiff Grand Opera Society ran from 1924 to 1934 . It presented week @-@ long annual seasons of popular operas including Faust , Carmen and Il trovatore , and like its predecessor was mainly an amateur body , with professional guest principals . Apart from the productions of these two enterprises , opera in Wales in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was generally presented by visiting companies from England .

In the 1930s Idloes Owen , a singing teacher and conductor , ran an amateur choir , the Lyrian Singers , based in Cardiff . In November 1941 , together with John Morgan ? a former Carl Rosa baritone ? and Morgan 's fiancée Helena Hughes Brown , Owen agreed to found the Lyrian Grand Opera Company , with Brown as secretary and Owen as conductor and general manager . They publicised their plan and held a general meeting of potential supporters in December 1943 ; at that meeting the name of the proposed organisation was changed to " Welsh National Opera Company " . By January 1944 plans were far enough advanced for the company 's first rehearsals to be held . Owen recruited a local businessman , W. H. (Bill) Smith (1894 ? 1968) , who agreed to serve as business manager . At first doubtful of the company 's prospects , Smith became its dominant influence , leading fund @-@ raiser , and chairman for twenty years from 1948 .

= = Early years = =

The new company made its debut at the Prince of Wales Theatre , Cardiff on 15 April 1946 with a double bill of Cavalleria Rusticana and Pagliacci . The orchestra was professional , mostly drawn from members of the BBC Welsh Orchestra ; all the singers were amateurs , except for Tudor

Davies , a tenor well known at Covent Garden and Sadler 's Wells , who sang Canio in Pagliacci . During the week @-@ long season the new company also staged Faust , with Davies in the title role . Although nearing the end of his career he was a considerable box @-@ office draw , and the company played to full houses . Nevertheless , the expense of a professional orchestra and the hire of costumes and scenery outweighed the box @-@ office receipts , and the season made a small loss . Finance remained a recurring problem over the succeeding decades .

Although Owen was the conductor for the performances of Cavalliera Rusticana , and remained as musical director of the company until 1952 , his health was fragile and he conducted none of the company 's other productions . His colleague , the chorus master , Ivor John , was in charge of the first season 's Pagliacci and Faust .

In 1948 the organisation was registered as a limited company , and the Cardiff season was extended from one week to two . The following year the company gave its first performances in Swansea . The chorus featured 120 performers by this time .

The company 's first few seasons attracted little attention from the British musical establishment , but by the early 1950s London papers began to take notice . Picture Post hailed the WNO 's chorus as the finest in Britain . The Times also praised the chorus : " It has body , lightness , rhythmic precision , and , most welcome of all , unflagging and spontaneous freshness . " By this time the company had expanded its repertoire to take in Carmen , La traviata , Madame Butterfly , The Tales of Hoffmann , The Bartered Bride and Die Fledermaus . The Times commented that Smith , Owen and their colleagues were " making history for Wales . The shackles of puritanism , which had kept this country from an art @-@ form perfectly suited to its national talents and predilections (for histrionics and dressing @-@ up are as natural to the Welsh as singing) had been broken for ever " .

= = Consolidating : 1950s and 60s = =

In 1952 the company moved its Cardiff venue to the Sophia Gardens Pavilion (built for the Festival of Britain) , with the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra as the company 's orchestra , replacing the previous ad hoc ensemble . The Pavilion was acoustically mediocre and lacked an orchestra pit ; two years later the company moved again , to the New Theatre where it played Cardiff seasons across the next fifty years . The 1952 season attracted particular interest because it included what was then a rarity : Verdi 's Nabucco . The company built a reputation for staging seldom @-@ seen Verdi works , including The Sicilian Vespers staged in the same year , I Lombardi in 1956 , and The Battle of Legnano , under the shortened title The Battle , in 1960 . The 1952 Nabucco was the WNO 's first production for which costumes and scenery were specially designed (by Patrick Robertson) rather than hired .

In 1953 the company staged its first work by a Welsh composer : Menna by Arwel Hughes . The composer conducted , and the leads were sung by two professional guest stars , Richard Lewis and Elsie Morison . The same year marked WNO 's first appearances outside Wales , playing a week at Bournemouth in April , and a week at Manchester in October , when The Manchester Guardian found the soloists first @-@ rate but the chorus disappointing , in both Nabucco and Il trovatore . A reviewer in The Musical Times commented on potential difficulties in assembling the wholly amateur chorus for performances beyond daily travelling range of their day jobs . By the time of the company 's first London season ? a week at Sadler 's Wells in 1955 ? the chorus was judged to be " lively and exciting " (The Musical Times) , " vibrant " and " moving " (The Times) and " joyous " (The Manchester Guardian) .

By the mid @-@ 1950s professional singers were cast in leading roles in most productions ; they included Walter Midgley in Tosca and La bohème (1955) , Raimund Herinx in Mefistofele (1957) , Heather Harper in La traviata (1957) , and Joan Hammond in Madame Butterfly (1958) . A possibility of strengthening the professional element of the company was mooted in 1958 , when a merger was proposed with the Carl Rosa Company , which was in financial difficulties . The proposal was not followed through and WNO continued independently while the Carl Rosa folded .

During the 1960s the company continued to widen its range . Its first Wagner production ,

Lohengrin , and its first Mozart , The Marriage of Figaro , were both performed in 1962 , conducted by Charles Groves . Another Welsh opera , Hughes 's Serch yw 'r Doctor (" Love , the Doctor ") was staged in 1960 . The popular Italian repertoire remained the core of the annual seasons , mostly directed by the head of production , John Moody . Leading roles were taken by rising stars such as John Shirley @-@ Quirk , Gwyneth Jones , Thomas Allen , Josephine Barstow and Margaret Price , the last of whom made her operatic debut with the company in 1962 . Established singers guesting with the company included Geraint Evans who played the title role in Don Pasquale in 1966 , and Ian Wallace in the same part the following year . Evans was also seen as Leporello in Don Giovanni in 1966 and as Falstaff in 1969 .

The gradual switch from amateur to professional continued in 1968 , when for the first time the chorus was supplemented by a smaller , professional group of singers ; the mix of amateur and professional choristers continued over the next five years . At the end of the 1960s the main WNO company , now a year @-@ round operation , consisted of 8 salaried principal singers , 57 guest soloists and a chorus of 90 amateurs and 32 professionals . As well as the Bournemouth players , the company engaged the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic , City of Birmingham Symphony and Ulster orchestras for different venues . In the last season of the decade 32 performances were given in Cardiff and 61 elsewhere in the UK . In addition to the main company , WNO maintained two smaller groups : one , with orchestra , toured Welsh towns , the other , consisting of 12 singers with piano , toured 79 , mostly small , towns in Wales and England . WNO instituted its own training scheme for young singers during the decade .

= = Fully professional : 1970s = =

In 1970 WNO stopped using the Bournemouth and other orchestras and established its own , known at first as the Welsh Philharmonia . Three years later the last amateur element of the company was removed when the chorus became fully professional . A further broadening of the repertoire took place in the 1970s : in 1971 WNO staged the first performances in Britain of Berg 's Lulu , directed by Michael Geliot , who had succeeded Moody in 1969 . In the view of Malcolm Boyd in The New Grove Dictionary of Opera , Geliot , " unpredictable and often controversial " , largely shaped the company 's style in the 1970s . In collaboration with the company 's musical director James Lockhart , Geliot is credited by The Times with introducing new young singers and " directing a host of groundbreaking productions " before leaving in 1978 . The critic Rodney Milnes wrote in 1975 about WNO 's productions :

I have never seen , well , hardly ever , a pretentious , silly or seriously misguided production , and neither have I seen a dull one . ? The company 's greatest virtue is that its work is dedicated above all to the service of composers and audiences , and not to some abstract notion of " prestige " nor to the vanity or ambition of individuals , and in this it is almost unique .

In 1973 Geliot 's WNO staging of Britten 's Billy Budd with Allen in the title role was presented on a Swiss tour , and two years later it was given in Barcelona . The company returned to London with its participation in the Amoco Festival of Opera at the Dominion Theatre in 1979 , presenting The Makropoulos Case , The Magic Flute , Ernani , Madame Butterfly , and Tristan and Isolde to capacity audiences .

The company 's traditional preference for the Italian repertoire was partly redressed during the decade : productions include WNO 's first staging of a Richard Strauss opera , Elektra , in 1978 . A new Welsh work , Alun Hoddinott 's The Beach of Falesá , was presented in 1974 . In 1975 , in co @-@ production with Scottish Opera , WNO began a cycle of Janáček operas , directed by David Pountney . Beginning with Jenůfa , the cycle continued with The Makropoulos Case (1978) , The Cunning Little Vixen (1980) , Káťa Kabanová (1982) and From the House of the Dead (1982) .

Among the guest artists who appeared with the company in the 1970s were the baritone Tito Gobbi , as Falstaff (1972) , the sopranos Elisabeth Söderström as Emilia in The Makropoulos Case (1978) and Anne Evans as Senta in The Flying Dutchman (1972) , and the conductors James Levine (Aida , 1970) and Reginald Goodall (Tristan and Isolde , 1979) .

In the late 1970s WNO combined with the Cardiff @-@ based Welsh Drama Company , becoming

the Welsh National Opera and Drama Company . The work of the drama company came under continued criticism , the Welsh Arts Council cut its grant , and the partnership ended in 1979 with the formal closure of the Welsh Drama Company .

= = 1980s = =

During the 1980s WNO continued to expand in scope . Handel (*Rodelinda* , 1981) and Martin? (*The Greek Passion* , 1981) were added to the company 's repertoire , and in 1983 *Das Rheingold* was staged in the WNO 's first Ring cycle , followed by the other three operas of the cycle over the next two years . *Das Rheingold* , *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* were conducted by the company 's musical director , Richard Armstrong ; *Die Walküre* (1984) was conducted by Goodall ; it was seen as a coup for the company to secure his services ? he was described by *The Guardian* as the greatest living Wagnerian conductor ? but the casting of the whole cycle was criticised for some serious weaknesses among the principal singers , and reviewers were generally unimpressed by Göran Järvefelt 's production .

The chief executive , Brian McMaster , did not appoint a replacement to Geliot as principal director during the 1980s , preferring to engage guest producers . Boyd mentions Andrei ?erban 's *Eugene Onegin* (1980) among the successes and Lucian Pintilie 's *Carmen* (1983) and Ruth Berghaus 's *Don Giovanni* (1984) as productions that received more mixed responses . Sir Charles Mackerras , the conductor for *Don Giovanni* , was open in his contempt for Berghaus 's production . Harry Kupfer 's *Fidelio* (1981) was condemned by *The Daily Telegraph* as " a piece of Marxist polemic " making " political sport " of Beethoven 's work . McMaster was thought by some too inclined to favour radical eastern European directors : Jonathan Miller , a leading English director , commented that he did not intend to take Bulgarian nationality , although it was " a must before Brian pays any attention " .

Armstrong stepped down in 1986 after thirteen years as musical director ; he was succeeded by Mackerras , whose association with the company dated back more than thirty years . Among the features of his six @-@ year tenure was an increasing use of surtitles for performances not given in English . In the company 's early days , all operas had been sung in English , but as more international stars began to appear as guest principals the language policy had to be reconsidered : few of the leading names in world opera were interested in relearning their roles in English . WNO steered a middle course between the practices of the two main London companies ; after the 1960s The Royal Opera had generally given operas in the original language , and English National Opera was committed to opera in English . WNO 's practice varied , after its early years . Examples from the 1980s include Wagner 's *Tristan und Isolde* sung in German , and the Ring in English ; and Verdi 's *The Force of Destiny* given in English and *Otello* in Italian . Mackerras was a strong advocate of performance in the original language , with surtitles : " I can 't imagine a greater advance for opera . ? What a gift ! It 's like Siegfried understanding the woodbird . "

= = 1990s = =

McMaster resigned in 1991 , having led the company to international status , with performances at La Scala , Milan ; the Metropolitan Opera , New York ; and in Tokyo . One of the last legacies of his tenure was the 1992 production of Debussy 's *Pelléas et Mélisande* , directed by Peter Stein and conducted by Pierre Boulez . The *New York Times* called WNO " one of the finest operatic ensembles in Europe " and noted that the first night of the Debussy work , in Cardiff , " attracted 80 critics from all over the United Kingdom and the Continent ... the most prestigious , intensely awaited event of the British operatic season . " The production was given at the Théâtre du Châtelet , Paris , a few weeks afterwards .

McMaster was followed as chief executive by Matthew Epstein , whose three years in charge (1991 ? 94) were described in a 2006 study by Paul Atkinson as " a less happy and less successful period " . Epstein was replaced by Anthony Freud , under whom , according to Atkinson , productions became " consistently strong , musically well prepared , intelligently staged and well cast . " Mackerras was succeeded in 1992 by Carlo Rizzi , who was music director at the time of WNO 's

golden jubilee in 1996 . When the occasion was marked with a new production of the " Cav and Pag " double bill that had launched the company in 1946 , the BBC commented that WNO was " one of the most respected opera companies in the world " . In The Observer , Michael Ratcliffe called the company " the most popular , populist and consistently successful arts organisation ever to come out of Wales ... with the loyalty and affection of audiences in Cardiff and across England ? ' The people 's opera ' is not a myth . It happened here . " The jubilee celebrations were overshadowed by the collapse of a plan for a purpose @-@ built home for the company , the Cardiff Bay Opera House .

During the 1990s WNO made its Proms debut , with a complete performance of Mozart 's Idomeneo , conducted by Mackerras in 1991 . The company played three short seasons at the Royal Opera House , Covent Garden in the mid @-@ 1990s , featuring Tristan und Isolde and La favorita in 1993 , The Yeomen of the Guard in 1995 , and The Rake 's Progress and the jubilee double bill of Cavalleria Rusticana and Pagliacci in 1996 .

= = 21st century = =

The company entered the new millennium in a state of some turmoil . A financial crisis had led to redundancies in the orchestra and the curtailment of the touring schedule ; the conservative works chosen for 2001 ? 02 were condemned by the press as " the dullest programme in recent memory " ; and Rizzi was about to be replaced by a young and untried successor , Tugan Sokhiev . Rizzi had gained great respect and affection during his nine @-@ year term as musical director ; his successor 's reign was brief and unhappy . Having taken up post in 2003 , Sokhiev resigned precipitately the following year . Rizzi agreed to reorganise his schedule , and , to public and critical acclaim , returned to the musical directorship in time to prepare the company for its long @-@ awaited move into a permanent base in Cardiff .

After the collapse of the Cardiff Bay Opera House scheme , a new project , the Wales Millennium Centre , met with more success . The necessary consents and funding were obtained , and work began in 2002 on a new multipurpose arts centre on the Cardiff Bay site . The centre included a 1 @, @ 900 @-@ seat theatre , which , among other uses , became WNO 's home base from 2004 , with its own rehearsal space and offices in the complex .

In the first decade of the 21st century WNO gave more than 120 performances a year , with a repertoire , generally , of eight full @-@ scale operas . Its regular audience figures totalled over 150 @, @ 000 annually , in ten principal venues , three of them in Wales and seven in England . During this period the company was criticised for being insufficiently Welsh . A local politician , Adam Price , said that WNO ought to have a Welsh musical director ; Alun Hoddinott said in 2004 , " WNO has put on perhaps four or five Welsh operas over 20 years They just seem to have an anti @-@ Welsh music bias . I am sad that they do not do something for Welsh composers , especially young ones . " A more positive view of WNO came from Scotland , where the two main newspapers , The Scotsman and The Herald , greeted a visit from the company in 2005 with enthusiastic praise , contrasting the flourishing of opera in Wales with its neglect by politicians in Scotland and the consequent decline of Scottish Opera . In 2010 WNO commissioned Gair ar Gnawd (" Word on Flesh ") , by Pwyll ap Siôn and Menna Elfyn , with words in Welsh , described as " a contemporary story about Wales today ... inspired by the translation of the Bible " .

From 2006 to 2011 the chief executive (titled " artistic director ") was John Fisher . His term overlapped with that of Lothar Koenigs who was musical director from 2009 to 2016 . A highlight of this period was the 2010 production of Die Meistersinger , produced by Richard Jones , starring Bryn Terfel as Hans Sachs . The production won superlatives from reviewers .

In 2011 David Pountney was appointed to succeed Fisher as chief executive . He had worked with the company since the 1970s , most recently on a 2006 The Flying Dutchman with Terfel which was set in space . In 2013 he programmed a trilogy of operas set in Tudor England : Donizetti 's Anna Bolena , Maria Stuarda and Roberto Devereux , with another trilogy the following year , on the theme of fallen women ? Puccini 's Manon Lescaut , Henze 's Boulevard Solitude and Verdi 's La traviata . For 2016 Pountney scheduled another trilogy , this time on the theme of Figaro , consisting

of Mozart 's The Marriage of Figaro and Rossini 's The Barber of Seville and a new work , Figaro Gets a Divorce with music by Elena Langer and libretto by Pountney .

In September 2015 WNO announced the appointment of Tomáš Hanus as its next music director , taking office for the 2016 ? 17 season . At the same time Carlo Rizzi was named the company 's conductor laureate , with immediate effect .

= = Recordings = =

Although the chorus and orchestra of Welsh National Opera have appeared on many commercial recordings , often featuring regular WNO soloists , there have been few sets , either audio or video , of the company 's own productions . Among those are Tristan und Isolde conducted by Goodall (1981) , Pelléas et Mélisande conducted by Boulez (1992) , The Yeomen of the Guard , conducted by Mackerras (1995) , The Doctor of Myddfai conducted by Armstrong (1998) , and Ariodante conducted by Ivor Bolton , directed by David Alden (1999) . The BBC made a studio video recording of a WNO cast in Katya Kabanova , conducted by Armstrong in 1982 .

The WNO chorus and orchestra have been engaged for studio opera recordings unconnected with the company 's productions , including Hamlet (1983) , Norma (1984) , Anna Bolena (1987) , Ernani (1987) and Adriana Lecouvreur (1988) conducted by Richard Bonynges , Faust (1993) and Katya Kabanova (1994) conducted by Rizzi ; and Gloriana (1993) , Eugene Onegin (1994) and Jenůfa (2004) conducted by Mackerras . For the WNO jubilee in 1996 , Decca drew on some of its studio recordings for a celebratory CD set with contributions from many soloists who had appeared onstage with the company and some who had not , the latter including Joan Sutherland , Luciano Pavarotti , Montserrat Caballé and Thomas Hampson . The orchestra of WNO has made studio recordings of non @-@ operatic music by Elgar , Delius , Coleridge @-@ Taylor and George Lloyd , and several sets of traditional Welsh songs and crossover music .

= = Music directors = =