

The Kubelik era at Covent Garden Opera, brief as it was, was characterized by a gleaming idealism. Kubelik was a believer in human values and human rights. His faith in mankind was pricked only by an endearing lack of self-confidence. Before *Bohème*, an opera he had never conducted before, Kubelik was seen 'simply quivering'.<sup>146</sup> Verismo and bel canto were not his cups of tea, but in Verdi and Wagner, Mozart and the moderns, he was deft and compelling. Polite and patient in rehearsal, his performances glowed with the incandescence of sudden inspiration. Some in the orchestra grumbled that he varied his tempi from one night to the next, but this was ever the mark of a fine conductor: to follow a fleeting fantasy and let each performance be a grand improvisation.

As a conductor Kubelik ranked, in his early forties, among the world's top names. He made records for EMI and Deutsche Grammophon and drew an ROH emolument of £6,500, necessitating an immediate increase in Webster's measly £3,500 salary. He rented a flat in Hampstead and sent his son, Martin, to a local prep school; his much-loved wife, Ludmilla, was physically incapacitated and undergoing repeated bouts of surgery.

Kubelik began in October 1955 as he intended to proceed, with a Verdi *Otello* that was meticulously well prepared and cast, for the most part, from internal resources, with the exception of the Chilean Ramon Vinay as the tragic hero and the Dutch soprano Gré Brouwenstijn as Desdemona. There was to have been a bigger star, but when Tito Gobbi failed to turn up by the end of the first week of rehearsal, Kubelik cancelled his contract. Gobbi, in his memoirs, maintained that his flight had been delayed by fog and it was all a wretched misunderstanding. Edward Downes, who was involved in the rehearsals, had a different recollection:

Gobbi's agent, Sandor Gorfinsky, rang up to say he was going to miss the first three rehearsals because he had engagements on the Continent and had sung the part of Iago more than a hundred times. Kubelik said: Absolutely unacceptable. He asked me if I knew anyone who could learn Iago in a weekend. So I went round to Otakar Kraus's flat in Notting Hill, and taught him the part.<sup>147</sup>

Gobbi turned up at the theatre with his agent and lawyers. Webster summoned learned counsel. On the opening night Peter Potter, Christopher West's one-legged assistant, anticipated a scandal when he saw Gobbi and his entourage occupying a row of centre-stalls. He and Webster hopped about the gangway behind the grand tier throughout the performance. At the final curtain, Gobbi rose to his feet and cheered Kraus to the echo. *Otello* was hugely acclaimed and, in Harewood's words, 'caused virtually a change of mind in public and critics about the possibilities of the young company'.<sup>148</sup>

Kubelik had called a press conference some weeks before to declare his commitment to performing opera in English with native singers, dispensing as far as possible with international stars who 'come and go and have no idea of real artistic co-operation'. This statement set him irretrievably at odds with the Callas-gaping opera lobby and with star-struck members of the ROH board, but Webster lent his support and the company swelled with the confidence he instilled. 'We learned so much from Kubelik,' said Elizabeth Latham. 'He was one of the few gentlemen that ever entered the theatre, and he imagined everyone else was ticking over just as he was. I don't think he was right for Covent Garden – he was too nice.'<sup>149</sup>

Elsie Morison, who would give up her career nine years later to become his second wife, was captivated by the way 'he understood singers, he breathed with you'. A *Magic Flute*, staged in January 1956 for the bicentenary of Mozart's birth, exemplified Kubelik's aims. The bill was topped by Morison, Jess Walters, Richard Lewis and Adele Leigh – all home-grown, with Shuard, Iris Kells, Josephine Veasey and Joan Carlyle in the supporting roles. Kubelik had refined the concept over seven months with the producer, Christopher West, and the designer, John Piper, and even got to grips with crusty old Professor Dent, inducing him to modify the English translation. The result was a trifle over-serious, but beautifully performed and improving measurably when Sutherland and Pears replaced Morison and Lewis in the revival. Webster found the production over-rehearsed and Rosenthal complained that Kubelik's productions were hogging all the stage time, at the expense of other conductors and guest stars. 'Kubelik's almost fanatical insistence that, when he was preparing a new work, virtually everything else had to go by the board, resulted in the duller mid-season (1956-57) in memory,' he wrote.<sup>150</sup>



There was also disaffection within. Shacklock, a company founder, resigned at the end of Kubelik's first season to pursue a freelance life that took her to the Bolshoi and the West End, where she wound up trilling the hills alive in *The Sound of Music*. 'I didn't find Kubelik warm,' she said. 'I can't say I didn't get on with him but we weren't on the same wavelength. And then he married Elsie Morison. We were very happy for Elsie.'<sup>151</sup> Fisher also quit, and others turned murmurous. Geraint Evans lost his Papageno role to Jess Walters and Adele Leigh was demoted from Pamina to Papagena. Evans took Leigh to see Webster, saying, 'it's rather disgraceful the way Adele has been treated.' Webster replied: 'I cannot interfere.'<sup>152</sup> (He did, however, implore Kubelik to find something for the Welshman, who 'has had no new part of any worth for some time'.)<sup>153</sup>

Joan Sutherland, Webster's white hope, went into a huff after falling out with Kubelik over her recitatives as the peasant girl in a *Carmen* rehearsal. She made no further headway in Kubelik's time. 'He was not much use to her,' reflected Downes, 'because he didn't understand Italian repertoire and was scared of much of it.'

On the other hand, he was quick to spot a Canadian truck-driver who, dismissed by the senior repetiteur Norman Feasey, was retrieved by Downes and coached for the king's role in an explosive *Ballo in Maschera* in Kubelik's second season. Jon Vickers was proof positive of the case for producing opera in English.

The second season also saw a thrilling but ill-attended *Jenůfa*, a mixed *Meistersinger* in which Sutherland (as Eva) refused to sing out because she felt Kubelik was letting the orchestra overwhelm her, and the first complete staging of Berlioz's *The Trojans* which sold out every seat for eight performances and sent ripples round the world as a miracle of English stagecraft, an object lesson to the French who persisted in demeaning their greatest composer.

In the huge *Trojans* cast there was only one foreigner, the American Blanche Thebom. Vickers was the male lead and, despite refusing to take much direction from the director, John Gielgud, bestrode the stage like a titan. The chorus numbered 120. 'You had to do a lot of coaxing, and try to remember their names and take trouble not to treat them like a lot of cattle,' the great actor reminisced. He also 'quickly came to realize that when the conductor comes on to the scene, he really is the boss'.<sup>154</sup> Kubelik insisted that *The Trojans* should be staged exactly as Berlioz intended, without cuts, gimmicks, updatings, or artificial sweeteners. The opera had never before succeeded at full length.

The only dissension arose in the boardroom, where Isaiah Berlin had been urging that 'a revival of an opera by Vivaldi would rivet international attention in a way in which *The Trojans* will not'<sup>155</sup> and the opera sub-committee chairman, Viscount Moore, offered to resign after Webster, without prior approval, engaged a Rumanian designer, Mariano Andreu, who was suspected to be Gielgud's lover. 'What folly on the part of anyone in Webster's vulnerable position to pick on a man whose chief qualification seems to be close personal association with John Gielgud!' exclaimed Waverley.<sup>156</sup>

The outcome, however, dispelled all clouds. Crabby old Dent, who supplied the translation, told Webster: 'It was a stroke of genius, I felt, to engage John Gielgud as producer. I went to several dress rehearsals and realized all along what difficulties he had to contend with, but he surmounted them marvellously, and I saw how he gradually developed the personalities of Amy Shuard, Jess Walters and A-canius, whose name I don't know but I think she is one of our own people.'<sup>157</sup> A voice from the past, Eugene Goossens, added his blessing: 'I have just come from *The Trojans* and I feel I must tell you – as I just told Rafael – how completely moved and overwhelmed I am by the splendour and sheer precision of the whole production.'<sup>158</sup> In the press, Peter Heyworth reported 'a triumph for the whole company' and Andrew Porter extolled 'a sumptuous and splendid and glorious experience'. 'It was the greatest thing we did,' said Iris Kells.

There was more to come from Kubelik, but not much more. Eager to introduce modern drama, he got Webster to nag his Soviet contacts for the rights to stage Prokofiev's *Fiery Angel* and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk*, both suppressed by Stalin. He proposed to conduct the world première of *The Greek Passion*, by his Czech fellow-exile Bohuslav Martinů, but Sir Arthur Bliss, composer of the ephemeral *Olympians*, persuaded the Board that the score should first be 'seen by one or two competent musicians'. The authorities selected for this task were Edric Cundell of the Guildhall School of Music; John Denison of the Arts Council; and Anthony Lewis, a provincial conductor. Their reports were denigratory and the opera was dropped.<sup>159</sup> Kubelik also talked of staging Rankl's *Deirdre* as an act of contrition, with Morison in the title role, only to be vetoed again by the Board. The discouragements were increasing.



In his third and final season, Kubelik conducted *The Carmelites* by Francis Poulenc, twelve months after its La Scala première, and a new *Tristan und Isolde* (in German) with Vinay and Fisher, alternating with the magnificently ascendant Swede, Birgit Nilsson. The only other new show of a cash-strapped season that coincided with the centenary of the ROH building was a Verdi *Don Carlos*, produced by Luchino Visconti and conducted by Carlo Maria Giulini – an all-foreign, all-star effort with Gobbi, Boris Christoff, Brouwenstijn, Fedora Barbieri and, wonder of wonders, in the title role, Jon Vickers, made in England and the major find of the Kubelik era. The production, said Peter Heyworth in the *Observer*, would be talked of ‘for years to come’ – and so it was. Giulini and Visconti attended all of each other’s rehearsals, setting a moral example of artistic collaboration. Kubelik’s reforms were bearing rich fruit but the Board was in no rush to support him.

Kubelik had warned that he planned his international diary a year in advance, and needed a quick decision on contract renewal.<sup>160</sup> No answer was forthcoming. His own resolve had been weakened by a persistent stream of xenophobic innuendos emanating from a familiar source. In June 1956, assessing an ROH ten-year report, the *Daily Telegraph* critic Martin Cooper cast doubt on the company’s aims and wondered whether English voices would ever grow large enough to fill its vast stage. Kubelik, stung, wrote to *The Times* urging critics to ‘ignore the snobs and instead fight for communion between the British public and British composers and singers.’ Cooper retorted that ‘these singers must be worth communing with’, and on the very same day, as if by mystic co-ordination, the arch-meddler, Sir Thomas Beecham, reached for his poisoned pen in support of his satrap hacks. Beecham’s letter to *The Times* opened with a swipe at the departed Rankl before pouring scorn on Kubelik:

Now we have another foreigner in charge. But does he possess any of the qualifications for the creation of a truly national organization? It is not a question only of conducting; the modern world positively teems with conductors of every nationality and nearly all of them are highly praised by the press.

What we have got to realize is that Covent Garden has neither accomplished the purpose for which it was established, nor is it ever likely to do so while it remains in the hands of those who are now in charge of it . . . The dignity of our nation is today at stake and we are presenting a sorry spectacle to the outside world.<sup>161</sup>

Kubelik, reading this, promptly offered his resignation, contending ‘that my status as a foreigner might be regarded as a handicap to creating British national opera’. His letter, together with a draft blast to *The Times*, landed on the desk of Viscount Moore, who went to the conductor and asked him to stay his hand for twenty-four hours until Lord Waverley had time to act.

The aged chairman summoned a board meeting the following afternoon, at the end of which he dictated a magisterial missive to *The Times*, declaring that the ROH music director had resigned upon reading Beecham’s letter. ‘The board have informed Mr Kubelik that they are unwilling to accept his resignation,’ intoned Waverley. ‘They have assured him that he has their entire confidence and that he can rely on their unstinted support in pursuit of the policy he has outlined during his tenure of his present office.’

Kubelik was called to the boardroom to be read this letter. ‘He flung his arms wide apart, said dramatically “It is finished,” and then embraced the chairman.’<sup>162</sup> There was no more talk of walking out, but the ‘unstinted support’, he found, was not wholehearted and the critical sniping persisted. Kubelik also felt vicariously the anguish of his dying friend Martinů, whose faith in his final opera had been damaged by Covent Garden’s rejection. In the end, Kubelik just slipped away, saying he would be happy to return as a guest conductor. He told Webster he wanted freedom to follow his artistic instincts, and fewer constraints from punitive UK taxes.<sup>163</sup> ‘I don’t remember why I left,’ he told me years later. ‘Perhaps I made a mistake. Fate is strange.’<sup>164</sup>

In 1961, after Ludmilla’s death, he found fulfilment in Munich as chief conductor of the Bavarian radio orchestra, with which he recorded (among many indispensables) the outstanding *Meistersinger* of all time – only for a contract dispute to prevent its release. Kubelik was never a lucky conductor. In 1973 he became music director of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, but resigned before taking office when Goran Gentele, his co-director, died in a car crash. Kubelik would not fulfil his operatic ideals, but his home life was made happy by Elsie and his final years were uplifted by the velvet revolution that liberated his beloved homeland.

For a brief moment in the 1970s it seemed that Kubelik might return to London as music director of Sadler's Wells, whose manager, Stephen Arlen, was now married to Iris Kells, Elsie's best friend. Kubelik weighed the offer before deciding, wisely, not to risk further exposure to the *Opera* gang who, he felt, had hounded him for reducing Covent Garden's dependence on unruly stars. He never told Elsie his reasons for leaving London. 'He was not a person to dwell on things,' she said. 'He never held a grudge and liked to look ahead, not backwards.'<sup>165</sup> His ROH file has been purged of any mention of his departure.

Brief as it was, the Kubelik era at Covent Garden left a lasting lesson in leadership, both practical and moral. 'Kubelik brought real humanity to his music making,' noted John Tooley. 'He wasn't obsessed with absolute precision of playing but what he wanted was the spirit, the heart of the music, and he knew how to get there.'<sup>166</sup> Harewood felt uplifted by his unusual blend of sincerity and professionalism, reporting in his memoirs that Kubelik's three years at Covent Garden were 'the best of my life'.<sup>167</sup>

What Kubelik brought to the company is best illustrated by Edward Downes. Conducting *Jenůfa* one night in 1959, Downes suffered a haemorrhage behind both eyes and was blinded. He groped through to the end of the opera and was rushed to hospital. Next day, a specialist told him there was no hope, his sight was destroyed.

'Kubelik wouldn't accept that,' said Downes. 'He sent me to three surgeons in Switzerland, one of whom operated and restored some of my vision. I was earning twelve pounds ten shillings a week and couldn't afford that kind of treatment. Kubelik paid it all out of his own pocket. He was a good man, in the true sense of the word. If he had stayed at Covent Garden, there is no telling what kind of family company we might have become.'<sup>168</sup>