Going to England

Having married, Carole McPhee and I travelled to England in June 1973, arriving in London on the Queen's Birthday weekend. Driving a car into Hammersmith roundabout while the Buckingham Palace garden party was in progress at 2pm, I wondered why the traffic was so heavy. Only a foreigner would do that!

When I arrived I realized how far behind I was and was horrified at the difference in standard. Within a month it was obvious I would never have sustained the Melbourne job at the level expected. In England the difference in standard between Australian and English musicians was enormous in two main areas, firstly, technically. Whatever the instrument, the technical proficiency of musicians in England was far in advance of those in Australia. This applied to good players as well as average players, of which I was one. Even with the average or moderate players who make up the bulk of professional musicians, there was a tremendous gap in technical proficiencies. Despite that, Australian musicians did, and always will, accommodate the need of the job but probably not with quite the same ease or capacity to think of other things at the same time, like interpretation which is probably what puts the English player in front. The other aspect was the capacity to sight read. English players' workload frequently demands they walk in at the eleventh hour and play at the highest standard with virtually no rehearsal. In the West End, for example, you could be called to a show to deputize for someone with half a day's notice, and you never saw the part until the conductor was standing in front giving the downbeat. You dare not make a mistake because if you did, you would not be asked back and that sort of work for the English musician is lifeblood work, basic income. That goes right across the board for orchestral playing, West End and even recording session playing.

I think it is in the pedagogy; the teaching in British institutions with long histories. After more than a hundred years, the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music must be close to perfect and bearing their imprimatur means you have to be the best. It is not just good standards of teaching. After training there is much to do before getting near a good orchestra, it is almost like climbing a ladder, but it makes the capacity to survive in a cut-throat environment like London possible. Players go on the road with a ballet company and take out of town dates as second player until ready. Then they move to out of town first player and principal player gigs before coming back into London as a second player. The difference is in standard; on hearing graduates from the Royal College and the Royal Academy, I was astounded. Music that was for me incredibly difficult to approach and achieve, they just played. Of the hundred who graduate from the Royal College each year, maybe only ten get into the London scene and that is the differentiating issue. Those ten are excellent and can probably work in each other's jobs with

ease. The other ninety graduates find ways and places to work and survive. Musical standards were such that they start off on an equal playing field at a very high level.

We were staying in Peggy van Praagh's flat, across the road from the Abbey Road Recording studios and the famous *Beatles*' pedestrian crossing, when one evening at 11pm, I was walking home and ran into cellist Robert Truman. I did not know he had left Australia. He was a member of the London Symphony Orchestra and was heading to a session to record *Beethoven 5* with someone like Georg Solti; his fourth call for the day which had started with a morning rehearsal, a recording at Bishopsgate in the afternoon and an evening concert at the Royal Festival Hall, tied to the morning rehearsal. In response to my suggestion this was onerous, he advised that since no one would make a mistake, the session would only last as long as it took to play the work once. It was an example to me of how sight reading was relied upon out of necessity to fit such a call in. Needless to say I was not prepared to stand by as soon as I discovered this. I began practising ten to twelve hours every day, working on things I knew were necessary to raise my standard.

A Steep Learning Curve

Two or three months later a job came up in the BBC Symphony Orchestra and I auditioned with a concerto ready to play and feeling comfortable. I did not know what would happen about the orchestral excerpts which had to be sight read. The first thing put before me was the fugue from *Schwanda the Bagpiper* by Weinberger. It is a fiendish part and I had never heard the work, let alone played it. I stumbled all over the place. There were another ten people behind me. I learnt the expectation was at a certain level. Something that would take me two or three weeks to prepare, they expected to be ready immediately.

You had to be competent to do these things after a heavy day and without mistakes because your colleagues would let you know about it. You had to be competent at sight reading very difficult music, catching all the nuances; it was not enough to get through it, they wanted you to phrase it. Within three months I was working in London. My first date was a Tchaikovsky piano concerto for a Royal Albert Hall *Prom Concert*. Then I worked with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra which had been formed by Sir Thomas Beecham in 1946. Until then, I did not understand what the statement about wanting an overseas player in Australia meant. While I remember to this day that you should not treat people like that, this was the reality of musical life.

In the thirteen years between leaving the Melbourne Trust Orchestra, working in England, returning to Australia and taking the job at the Trust as their administrator, an enormous amount happened to me which changed substantially my perspective. When I left Australia I was a completely different person. This is important to note because it was what I did in those ensuing

Warwick Ross, studio pic, London 1974--*Photo by Peter Hampson.*

years that caused the change, not directly, but it was a kind of growing, slow change which I did not know had happened until I started to draw on new skills acquired.

After a couple of years in London, I was doing a recording session in a studio at West Hammersmith. I had also been booked to play with the Royal Philharmonic on that day, with a 10am Festival Hall rehearsal tied to the evening concert. I was engaged to deputize for a bass player who had taken another booking and was confident I could do it because it was close to the Festival Hall. He told me to be at the recording session for 9am and it would be over by 9.30am. I took the risk and accepted. In those days you could park easily at both venues. There was no-one at the session studio except the engineer and the producer who advised a 9.30am recording start. I got ready but there was no music. At 9.28am almost to the dot six violinists walked in. I had never met any of them before but learnt later that they were the core of the London recording scene. None of them worked with the orchestras, they spent their entire life in studios. They were well-dressed in suits and looked like accountants. They sat down without fuss, took out their violins, tuned and waited. The music director gave parts out to everyone. It looked like a commercial jingle of some kind. It was moderately difficult but I did not have problems reading it. We started playing at 9.29am, it was down within three minutes on the first take and the violinists without any further direction started packing their instruments. The director said it was alright and they left for a 10am session elsewhere. I arrived at my rehearsal and was on stage ready to go at 9.55am, without any idea what I was going to play. Had I not been able to sight read to their standard, I would have delayed those six players and incurred their fury if their next session had been missed. That is the way the London scene works: the ability to sight read is paramount for survival. It became apparent to me there was a large gap in our standards. It is more than just teaching; we had good teachers in Australia and diligent students; and there were quite a few Australians in London holding key positions in the orchestras. All these people had an Australian educational background, although they had studied overseas at some stage but the standard capacity was there. It was more than pedagogy and individual player's capacity. It is the heritage of playing music; the history of music that exists in England. It is accepted as part of the fabric of English life and revered as important. You have only to look outside of the profession into amateur areas to see this fact.

Musical Life in England

There are very good amateur orchestras all over England, playing difficult music for the love of it and staffed with reasonably good players, most of whom have not been professional musicians. Many professional people, such as doctors and lawyers, use it as relaxation from their daily work. Their standards are commensurate with what has been historically accepted as the

australian sinfonia

The many top-rate Australian orchestral musicians living and working in London prompted the formation of the Australian Sinfonia late in 1975. Since then, successful concerts in the Queen Elizabeth Hall and St. John's, Smith Square, have established the Australian Sinfonia as a fresh and potent force in London's musical life.

The Australian Sinfonia is supported financially by the Australia Council and both English and Australian business interests. The orchestra consists basically of thirty string players, most but not all Australians, with additional wind players or chamber ensembles according to programme. The Australian Sinfonia is building a diverse repertoire which ranges from masterpieces of the classic and romantic eras to interesting new works by European and Australian composers.

The close musical ties which exist between Australia and Great Britain have been exemplified by the Australian Sinfonia's fruitful collaboration in concert with artists such as John Ogdon, Jane Manning, John Wilbraham, Shura Cherkassky, Erich Gruenberg, the King's Singers and the London Percussion Virtuosi. Australian soloists who have found a valuable platform through the Sinfonia include Roger Woodward, Rhondda Gillespie, Ronald Thomas, Valda Aveling and Judith Hall.

New works have been commissioned from Australian composers Alison Bauld, Anne Boyd and Haydn Reeder. Music by Richard Meale has also been performed and the Sinfonia is to present compositions by Barry Conyngham and Malcolm Williamson as part of a forthcoming concert at St. John's, Smith Square, on Sunday 29 May.

Photo: Mary Greig

If you wish to be included in the Australian Sinfonia's mailing list – free of charge – please contact:

The Secretary,
Australian Sinfonia,
17 Shakespeare Gardens,
London N2 9LJ.

Telephone: 01-883 7306

australian sinfonia

Music Director
Geoffrey Simon

Leader
Ashley Arbuckle

Executive Committee
David Abrahams *Treasurer*
Jill Mintz *Secretary*
Geoffrey Simon

VIOLINS
Ashley Arbuckle *Leader*
Ian McDonough *Principal*
Richard Bureau *Principal*
Gay Bonds
Paul Buxton
Jennifer Garwell
Jennifer Helsham
Dorothy Hollingsworth
Simon Houldsworth
Mary Leaf
Lennox Mackenzie
Ellen Martin
Gillian Rosefield
Prunella Sedgwick
Dayle Stevens
Gil White

VIOLAS
George Robertson *Principal*
Myrna Edwards
Robert Leighton
Richard Mitchell
James Shenton
Richard Williamson

'CELLOS
Martin Robinson *Principal*
Jocelyn Gale
Mary McLeod
Annette Rosefield
Katharine Thulborn

BASSES
Michael Brittain *Principal*
Ian Hall
Warwick Ross

Secretary
Anna Mills

Orchestral Manager
Dayle Stevens

Representative in the USA
Jan Bitcon

Musical Assistant
Jay Fishman

Australian Sinfonia
17 Shakespeare Gardens
London N2 9LJ
01-883 7306

In accordance with the requirements of the Greater London Council:

Persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating or to sit in any of the other gangways.

No smoking in the Auditorium.

The taking of photographs in the Auditorium is not permitted.

The Australian Sinfonia gratefully acknowledges assistance from the Australia Council and Mr. Rupert Murdoch towards the cost of this season's concerts.

as

norm. A lot of Edward Elgar's works were written for and first performed by such players. *The Dream of Gerontius* was first performed by an amateur group and choir in Birmingham Town Hall in October 1900. It was something of a disaster and received scathing reports which disturbed Elgar immensely but that is irrelevant. Most of these amateur players played new music and the standard classical repertoire. In Wales the place abounds with male singers. Male choirs are part of the Welsh way of life. They accept that they are good singers and in interesting choirs; it is not unusual. It is the same with brass bands comprising mostly musicians who have been in the mines and colliery bands: there to enjoy music at the end of a gruelling working day. I saw this as I did casual orchestral dates round England. Provincial music producers would build up sections occasionally with London players to add more strength; especially with the double bass since there was not an abundance of double bass players. I began to understand the social situation of musicians and that this was their heritage impacting on young students whilst studying. You had to work hard to improve technique to live and survive as a musician in the UK, work hard at your

technical deficiencies and I had plenty. It was also important to listen to what was going on in the entire music scene, not just in the four London Orchestras. There are some tremendously good events and festivals, such as the annual Aldeburgh Festival, established in 1948 by Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears and Eric Crozier.

I played a lot of string orchestra chamber music, including a concert with the Oxford Chamber Orchestra. On this occasion their regular bass player was unavailable. There was a morning rehearsal and the program was mostly Benjamin Britten's works, including *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* which has a demanding double bass solo at Variation H. At the rehearsal, the conductor topped and tailed because he did not have time to play through the entire program. He did not rehearse individual solos, assuming players were comfortable with their pieces. He would start the solo to get the tempo right, go for a couple of bars and go on with the next piece. I was pleased my sight reading was good by then, but it was still a gruelling experience. After the rehearsal I stayed back and ran over a few of the parts to get myself a little bit in front. There was a slight delay to the start of the concert. We were waiting for the guest of honour, Benjamin Britten: it was a concert for his sixty-first birthday! If I was nervous before, I was doubly nervous playing this great man's music in his presence, hoping not to make it the worst birthday he ever had. It worked out, thanks to my sight reading skills.

For a while I was principal bass for the English Sinfonia, a full chamber orchestra with wind and brass based in Nottingham, in the Midlands, where the conductor lived. There was an Australian leader, violinist John Glickman, and Ronald Thomas led it during the time I was there. Most of the freelance players lived and worked in London and came together for four or five concerts a year in Nottingham, Derby, and throughout the north with an occasional London performance. London dates were usually with a really good soloist, such as Mstislav (Slava) Rostropovich playing a Haydn cello concerto. Also, I worked occasionally with the London Mozart Players, the longest established chamber orchestra in the United Kingdom, founded by Harry Blech in 1949.

During those first few years in England I played anywhere and everywhere. I turned nothing down, which was a good thing to do. I went out of London into the provinces and amateur circles. I played with the Worthing and Brighton Orchestras who did three or four concerts a year. They were just one day events but you met interesting people who had been part of the fabric of the English heritage of music. It began to change my attitude to playing. Initially it was about playing well enough to get a job to make money to live. Things started to change. After a couple of years I began to play well enough to play with good musicians and money mattered less. If you play with an amateur orchestra you are really only receiving your costs and the money in the orchestras was limited anyway. Besides the recording business, you did not make any money in London unless you were flat out. Orchestral players did two to three calls a day, every day, just

to make ends meet. So it was not about money but it was certainly about music and there were some good conductors coming into London regularly. There are four major orchestras, outside of the BBC, all giving concerts with interesting conductors and soloists, so it was a very vibrant musical activity. If you could be part of that, even a small part; it was very rewarding and there were some magnificent moments which made you forget altogether about money.

By the mid-1970s, I had a completely different view on music. I had a technique to accomplish essential things. There were certain things I would not be capable of doing because I had left it too late. I could survive and had a circle of fellow musicians I enjoyed being with socially. We used to have a good time playing concerts, especially with the smaller orchestras like the Sinfonia and Mozart Players. I saw musicians as unique to other sectors of the workplace in that they live their work and their work is their life and they commit to it wholeheartedly. That is not to say they do not have a life away from the instrument but the social connection, usually in the pub, usually after a concert, is a very valuable one which allows you to communicate. Some of the members lived in the north, Birmingham way, so I got to know those societies which are very different from London, although there was the same desire to serve the music to the best of your capacity without any nonsense and without flaunting it. A valuable thing to understand and very enjoyable to be part of, because you always felt part of a team; everyone supported each other. I never worked with anyone who was not supportive of what I was trying to do and my limitations. It was always a pleasant experience and wherever you sat in the section, whether a principal or in the rank and file, people worked with you and helped. I could not quite believe this was happening; I was not used to that kind of attitude. I had come from an attitude where you have to be good and you take the job, play your best and do all you can to keep it from someone else. That was necessary for survival in England but it was not dealt with that way. You work with your colleagues and you support them, otherwise you do not function properly.

London Mozart Players

First Violins
David Takeno
Felicity Notariello
Roland Stanbridge
Margot Macgibbon
Nigel Beresford
David Edwards
Joseph Tuban
Sheila Beckensall

Second Violins
Nicholas Dowding
Levine Andrade
Jonathan Strange
Susan Fisher
Philip Galloway
Gillian Harrit
Eva Gruenbaum

Violas
Roger Best
Channa Salomonson
Richard Wilson
Natnie Jamieson
Trevor Snoad

Cellos
Bernard Richards
Angela East
Ursula Hess
Martin Thomas

Double Basses
Joseph Kirby
Warwick Ross

Flutes
Peter Lloyd
Michael Hirst

Oboes
Jenny Caws
Janice Knight

Clarinets
John Stenhouse
David Campbell

Bassoons
Kerry Camden
Linda Nealgrove

Horns
James Diack
Anthony Catterick

Trumpets
Michael Laird
Mark Emney

Timpani
Robert Howes

Orchestral Manager
Susanna Sparks

General Manager
Michael de Grey
105 Hartfield Road
London SW19 3TJ
Tel : 01- 542 5698

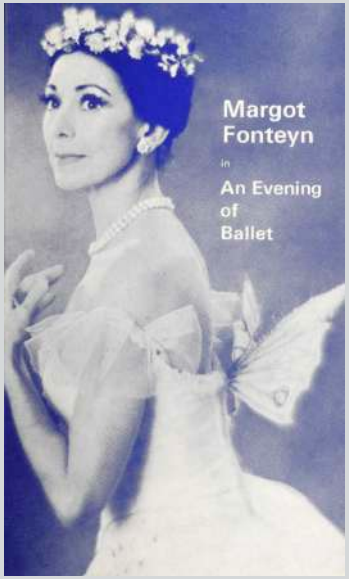
I began to see there were certain people who worked better with each other in the orchestras, and if you sat certain people together, the result from that desk was magnificent. Move the combination slightly and you do not get quite the same result. You could pick people, not

because of their playing so much, but because of their personalities and capacity to be part of the team, to get maximum effect. There were several double bass principals I liked to play with and others not so much. When I was with someone I liked playing with, it was enjoyable and generally very musically rewarding with a successful outcome. If you had the choice, you pick the right people, and in England you do have the choice, whereas in Australia it was difficult, as we had experienced with the Melbourne Orchestra, to find good players for a double bass position. In England there would be over a hundred good players who would be interested in that position. You make decisions on the personalities and style of playing to suit the orchestra. Clearly that is what the English did which we had not done: they developed an individualization of string playing styles. The four London Orchestras had different string sections and string sounds: there was a Philharmonia sound, an LSO sound, and so on. If your playing suited that sound, you worked with that orchestra. It was never articulated but it was obvious; although an audience member once said to me they liked the Philharmonia string sound better than any of the other orchestras and supported it for that reason. This was a non-musician who identified a very subtle idiosyncrasy. When you worked with people who had your concept of the sound required, you usually had a good result and it did not matter whether they were professionals or amateurs.

The Fonteyn Galas

At that time Carole was assisting Dame Margot Fonteyn, as proof-reader, in the writing of her book[1]. She had a long association with Fonteyn from Australian Ballet days in the early 1970s. Carole was a first rate publicist, working with the British Council[2]. Prior to that, she had worked on publicity for London Festival Ballet. One Sunday afternoon, we were sitting around with a group of ballet people, mostly from London Festival Ballet[3], including Beryl Grey's[4] assistant and a couple of dancers. We played with the idea of asking Fonteyn to dance concert performances of solos and *pas de deux*. This had not been done before. The idea developed further to involving three sets of dancers, representative of various styles. No one really thought it could work but Carole talked to Margot who thought it was a great idea. That was the birth of the Fonteyn Galas which ran for the next eighteen months across the UK and Europe. This concept was later picked up by Michael Edgley and brought to Australia. With Margot's help, we put together a group of six

1 *Margot Fonteyn: Autobiography*, first published by WH Allen, London, 1975.
2 British Council, founded in 1934, an organization specializing in international cultural and educational relations and opportunities and the promotion of wider knowledge of the United Kingdom and the English language abroad.
3 London Festival Ballet, founded in 1950 by Anton Dolin, Alicia Markova and Julian Braunsweg, to tour ballet in the UK and abroad. Renamed English National Ballet in 1989.
4 Dame Beryl Grey, DBE (b 1927-), English dancer, teacher, ballet director.



or seven dancers including Lynn Seymour and Robert North, from London Contemporary Dance, and they did a modern work. Maina Gielgud, who had been performing contemporary solo work with percussion with Béjart in Paris, was available as were two dancers from the Tokyo Ballet and two from Russia, including Andre Prokovsky, who danced Russian repertoire. Margot elected to work with David Wall, Royal Ballet principal dancer. They all selected pieces representing their particular expertise. I was pleased it was agreed to present this with an orchestra (in Australia it would have been with taped music), which I offered to get together.

We set up a company, *Arts Management Production Services*, comprising myself, Carole, and Paul Sarony who booked venues for shows going to the provinces. He had a long relationship with venues and managers and could execute a reasonable and fair deal. We booked a tour including Cardiff, Leeds, Birmingham and Southampton; all out of London dates, and one-night stands. As orchestra fixer I called on the services of freelance players who worked for our programs as the International Ballet Orchestra. Knowing they were all good sight readers, we did not need to rehearse long hours. We needed to accommodate the dance requirement, so had to work with the dancers who had limited availability. It was a juggle, but we managed to coincide venue and dancers' availability to book performances. A special approach to rehearsals with the dancers was necessary. The musicians travelled from London in the morning for a three hour afternoon rehearsal with the performance starting at 7.30pm. In most cases Margot did not want to rehearse before a performance but her music was known to the conductor and it was standard repertoire for the musicians. All they needed to know was the tempi and we quickly topped and tailed her pieces. For others, like Maina, there was complex percussion to play and Robert and Lynn's material needed to be rehearsed. We generally played to packed houses, it was tremendously successful. Those people who said it would never work, came and loved it.

I played as well and kept that operation alive for the remainder of my time in England. When it came to selecting the orchestras, I found I was drawing on understanding how people work together. I would ring a principal player—say clarinet—and then I would know the second clarinettist who usually worked with this person and from that you knew there would be one or two who worked very well together, with a good, tight sound, and they seemed to understand each other. I would ring a section leader who had done previous dates and would suggest others to work with. Eventually it started to fall in with the same people most of the time, certainly key players like the orchestra leader, the principal wind players and anyone who had a solo, like trumpets and oboes. We had very good orchestras and they all felt comfortable working with each other, although they did not work with each other regularly, they turned up as if they were an already established orchestra and fitted in beautifully wherever we were.

We had the same problem experienced all over the world; the theatre pits being inadequate for an orchestra of about forty to fifty players, depending on what ballets we were doing. However, they all accommodated well and we always gave good performances artistically. I was paying the right money and for any one clarinet there would have been thirty options, and there might have been ten of them available, so you could have booked anyone. I found myself waiting to see if certain players were available and go with their colleagues. It tended to work and consequently the atmosphere and morale in the orchestra, even though it came together in five minutes, was as if they had been together for ten years in many cases. It was good to be playing with them because I could see the results of my work. Sometimes it could have been better. Other times it was magnificent and I could quietly consider my choices for next time.

I was on an unrealized learning curve. It was not until I was back in Australia that I understood I had developed these skills. No-one had taught me and there is nothing magical about it, just common sense, understanding people and providing the opportunity for them to do what they do best and not putting anything in their way. I was quite happy in England until the Conservative politician, Enoch Powell, began to stir up racism and there was a view that there were too many Indians coming into England and they were flooding the place. India was a Commonwealth country so its citizens had a right of entry, but Australians and Canadians had certain restrictions; they were there under the sufferance of the British Government. I did not have a working permit. I was there because I was married to a lady with a working permit. There was a kerfuffle about quotas and I think the English were agitating because they were concerned that these immigrants, although British subjects, were straining welfare and hospital services. There was evidence this was happening; going to a hospital to have a baby was not an option unless it was an emergency. Hospital beds were full. There were too many people entitled to the public health system who were not born there. As a consequence, in about 1978 the Home Office started cracking down on Australians and Canadians. I did not get asked to leave and did not want to be in that position because I did not want that mark on my name. I knew I could not fight it. Carole was doing good work with the British Council. We were running Fonteyn shows, with two more contracted, so we decided I would come back, find a place to live and an income and she would follow. I came back in 1978 as other doors were opening for me there. As I was leaving, I was told my name was on the list for Philharmonia Orchestra work in the next season, so that was disappointing. I would have loved to work with that great orchestra.

In England my style of management had to be quick with no time for forward planning. I was used to working with things that were planned but fluid and unsettled until the eleventh hour and it was something I was comfortable with. I had been used to making decisions that

affected us personally because if anything did not work financially, it came out of our pocket. The first night of the Fonteyn galas we did not know whether it would be successful or not. I had engaged an orchestra from London, the cost being about £4,000, which was two or three year's income in those days. I realized how frightening the responsibility was. If it failed we would have to pay the theatre, the dancers and the orchestra unless we declared ourselves insolvent and none of us wanted that. That reality made me very careful about quick decisions. Over the next couple of years I acquired the capacity to make critical decisions fast that did not affect the end result, even if the end result was not good. I learnt to build in contingencies, an entirely different style of management than most established organizations have. It is more entrepreneurial than anything else.