

opera-tunity knocks

Earlier this year, AFWM Ltd agreed a major new sponsorship deal with **Devon Opera**. KATE TRELEAVEN went to meet the man at the helm of Devon's only professional opera company.

It was a faulty photocopier at Robert Hough's home that first led him to step through the doors of AFWM Ltd's newly opened office in Chudleigh last summer. "I was dashing down the high street in search of a copier when I spotted a shiny new office and thought 'Ah! They must have got one!' So, I went in and introduced myself," explains Devon Opera's energetic - and ever-resourceful - chairman.

This chance encounter paved the way for an exciting new sponsorship deal which has already seen AFWM Ltd facilitate a number of new opportunities for Devon Opera

via its relationships with the National Trust and the Royal Horticultural Society, in addition to providing financial support.

"Our association with AFWM Ltd has undoubtedly opened doors for us," says Robert. "For example, we recently met with the National Trust and they have hired us to provide a singer and pianist for three exclusive concerts at Coleton Fishacre and Greenway House - the Devon holiday home of Agatha Christie." At Greenway, the concerts will feature musical accompaniment on Agatha's very own Steinway piano. "Guests will have dinner then go through to the drawing



● *Cosi fan tutte* (2017)

room to enjoy a musical soiree just as people would have done years ago. It will be very special; very intimate," explains Robert, with his customary zeal.

Devon Opera - known previously as New Devon Opera - has been providing opera lovers with live professional events since 2005. Its productions range from bespoke private concerts to public performances of complete operas. "Our aim is to attract opera newbies as well as opera enthusiasts to experience the pleasure of fine singing, acting and sensational music in some of the most magical settings in Devon," says Robert, who took over as chairman of the registered charity in 2012.

Robert's interest in opera developed as a child on the back of his obsession with mechanical musical instruments. "I've been a collector of these instruments since I was twelve and because some of them played things I didn't know - like Ride of the Valkyries - I started looking up the various operas," explains Robert. "And so, with an enquiring mind, my opera knowledge and love of the performing arts has grown over the years through mechanical music."

Fourteen years ago, when Robert and his wife Jackie decided to build a music room at their home to house their ever expanding collection of mechanical musical instruments, they started putting on concerts which caught the attention of New Devon Opera trustee, Roderick Hunt. "Roderick compèred one of our events, saw a standard he liked, and asked me to take on the running of New Devon Opera as the then chairman was standing down," Robert recalls. "I accepted because I thought it would be a challenge," he says. "And it certainly has been!"

In an effort to put the company on a firmer financial footing, Robert started by restructuring the organisation and scaling back on its productions. "It had become overblown and the standard was very patchy," he acknowledges. Robert cast off the chorus and replaced the orchestra with a piano in order to invest more in the principal singing talent. "Our priority has been to secure the very highest standard of artistic, performing and singing skills that we can buy in the market place," explains Robert. "But we're very keen that it isn't just about singing ability. They have to be able to deliver it, and communicate with the audience. Some performers are naturals, some are not!"

In the early days, Robert's cut-backs meant a move away from the performance of full-length operas. "We didn't have the cash reserves and couldn't take the risk," he explains. "Instead, we found a director who wrote us a scenario based around the life of Verdi, incorporating scenes from his operas. We then did the same with the music of Mozart and Puccini which were also very popular."

Robert's appointment as chairman signalled a fresh start for the company and a change of name to 'Devon Opera'. "I felt it wasn't 'new' anymore, so what was the point?" he says, with a shrug. Next, he embarked on a course of restructuring which saw José Cura replaced as Patron by the Dowager Countess of Devon - "because this is Devon, she's got much to offer and she's interested" - and the creation of a new team of trustees and directors. "One of my sons thinks I'm running ICI," Robert quips, "but I just like structure and I know where people should go and what they should do."

The changes have paid off and, with the help of additional funds from new sponsors and a fortified



● *Rigoletto* (2016)



● *Così fan tutte* (2017)



● *La traviata* (2018)



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membership of Friends and Associates, Devon Opera has been able to restore full-length opera to its repertoire. Recent productions include *Così fan tutte*, *Rigoletto*, *La traviata* and *The Barber of Seville*. A clarinet and cello have been added to the piano to form a trio of musical accompaniment. "It's a model I've always had the vision for," says Robert. "The challenge now is holding on to it."

Unfortunately, the recent coronavirus pandemic has forced the postponement of Devon Opera's summer production of Puccini's *La bohème*. Plans are now being made to reschedule these performances at several Devon venues in July 2021.

The new production - when it eventually happens - will see Devon Opera perform Puccini's *La bohème* in its entirety. Well, almost. "Act 2 is a challenge because it involves lots of children, a street scene with an army and goodness knows what," concedes Robert. "We've cut all that," he continues. "So, our Act 2 will start with the famous Musetta's waltz song, when she's flirting at the café Momus."

Puccini's timeless masterpiece is set in Paris in the 19th century and follows the bohemian lives and loves of a group of young friends. The gloriously tuneful score perfectly captures the romance, high jinks and heart-rending tragedy of their times together. The opera has always been a top favourite of music lovers and never fails to amuse, enthrall and move its audiences.

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Rehearsals take place in Devon over two weeks. "A two week run-in is very tight compared with a big opera house where you'd be looking at three or four months," admits Robert. "It's tight so we tend to look for people who have sung the roles before. We sing in the original language with English surtitles - I said that from day one, to set us apart and give us credibility. This is very attractive to singers because opera sounds so much better in the original language, and they don't always get the chance."

Devon Opera prides itself on offering affordable opera, with tickets for next summer's performances of *La bohème* starting as low as £20. "The ticket prices don't cover our costs, which is why revenue from sponsorship, donations and memberships is so essential," explains Robert. "We should be charging more like £45 to £50 a ticket, but I would never want to be accused of exclusivity."

Setting its standards as high, if not higher, than the touring operas that regularly visit the South West, Devon Opera guarantees its audiences an unforgettable experience whether you're an opera buff, a first-timer, or somewhere in between.

Keep an eye on Devon Opera's recently revamped website for a list of *La bohème's* rescheduled dates and venues for 2021, plus news of a special gala opera evening taking place this autumn at one of Devon's National Trust properties. ▼



● *The Barber of Seville* (2019)

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