

Welsh National Opera



Penny Simpson talks to Ieuan Davies, one of Welsh National Opera's longest serving chorus members.

Ieuan Davies is an opera singer with a difference. He has spent over three decades working with the Welsh National Opera, travelling across five continents as a member of its acclaimed chorus. He has the WNO to thank for opportunities to perform in productions directed by legendary theatrical talents such as Peter Stein - as well for introducing him to his wife, Molly.

"Not bad on reflection for a one-time miner," he acknowledges.

"But then if I hadn't been trying to avoid National Service, I might never have become a professional singer at all. I went underground in the first place, you see, because it seemed preferable to the horrors of the army, as described to me by my elder brother.

"Fate stepped in again. The company manager was, apparently, interested in music. He heard about my singing - I was winning competitions at the National Eisteddfod by then - and he had me brought up from the pit to work in the stores. Nothing was ever said mind. He called me out from the pit head one morning and told me of my new job. Looking back, I realise he was doing that to protect my voice."

It was a wise move. Ieuan was by then receiving singing lessons at the Welsh College of Music and Drama. From here, he auditioned and was accepted for a WNO training project Opera For All. It started up just one month after the coal mine where he worked was closed down following a major fire.

"And that was the start of a way of life, not a career," he explains.

"What is unique about this company is its atmosphere, its spirit of camaraderie. Our guest singers are bowled over by the friendliness of the place. Everybody's on first name terms and it's not at all elitist.

"For young singers, there's the added attraction of coming out of the chorus to sing small roles in major productions that tour internationally - as well as all over the UK. That's where I've benefited from being with the company. I've sung many a role, as well as appeared in the chorus, roles like The Simpleton in Boris Gordunov, where I take the stage for a solo. Wonderful."

"Sometimes it's like any other other job, you get a little fed up with being on the road, or whatever. But there are compensations. I sang before Princess Diana in Peter Stein's production of Falstaff in New York, for example."

Walking out on to the stages of international opera houses is a far cry from his early days with WNO. When he first joined as a member of Opera For All, he was touring with a small company of other young singers with nothing more than a piano for backup! In 1968, the company's chorus turned professional and Ieuen joined up.

"There were still voluntary singers brought in when the chorus numbers needed boosting for big productions," he recalls. "We got an £1 extra a week in the pay packet for rehearsing with them on a Sunday!"

"Being in the chorus doesn't bring the fortune of a Pavarotti, but I pay the bills and I enjoy myself. At the end of the day, we are all there to play, and if you are happy playing, that feeling comes through for your audience."