



## LETTER FROM THE UK

### War in our time

Dear Aunt Ethel

BBC Radio 4 has changed its programmes to give a blow-by-blow commentary: Britain and America are now at war with Iraq. Last weekend — the lull before Desert Storm II — London was beautiful as I cycled to Richmond and along the Thames to Kew. Spring was in the air, confirmed by hosts of daffodils and scent and sight of blossom. On the Sunday I was given a 'Friends of Covent Garden' ticket to a morning rehearsal of *Madama Butterfly* at the Royal Opera House: a sublime treat for a Puccini addict. More ominous than ever was the braggadocio of US Naval Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton: one of the 'Yankee vagabondi' who could comb the world at will, riding at anchor here, moving on to there. I had forgotten too that the drama was enacted above the harbour of Nagasaki.

That evening my son and I saw *My Fair Lady* at Drury Lane, just round the corner from the Opera House, which is exactly where the opening scene is set. The billing is 'probably the greatest musical of them all'. Probably? In the programme notes, director Trevor Nunn writes: '*Pygmalion* is a collection of very brilliant theatrical and comic ideas, but *My Fair Lady* quite simply is a masterpiece'; and Andre Previn: '... so perfect that afterwards, what else could you do?' No matter how well-worn the plot, and how understated the romance, I had to wipe away a tear as Eliza's 'rain in Spain' got it, by George.

*My Fair Lady* is the apogee of Anglo-American collusion: Shaw (Irish I grant you), Harrison, Andrews, Holloway, Beaton and the West End on one side of the Atlantic; Lerner (OK, an avowed Anglophile) & Loewe, Hepburn, Broadway and Hollywood on the other. However, a French-sounding producer, Gabriel Pascal, persuaded Shaw to provide a happy ending for the film version of *Pygmalion*. Today, off-stage, the UK-US alliance condemns itself by ev'ry syllable its belligerent leadership utters; and the French still don't care what they do, as long as they pronounce it properly.

Yet, when the editor of the *British Medical Journal*, Richard Smith, suggests in the Christmas issue that if (slightly) less were spent on health, and more on the arts, health would probably be improved, he begins by quoting John F Kennedy. 'When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry reminds

him of his limitations . . . The artist . . . becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an offensive state.' Smith tells why Simon Rattle shocked Britain by leaving to become chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic. 'There is something about being in a place where the arts are essential, even to politicians. No civilised politician in Germany does anything except support the arts,' says the musician. 'Everybody in the arts in Britain spends too much time trying to survive.' Once more it was Shaw, ridiculing physicians in *The Doctor's Dilemma*: 'the only possible teacher except torture is fine art'.

The only almost risqué joke which our Latin master ever told us was the only almost risqué item which *Punch* had published up to that time. It noted the demise of one John Longbottom at the tender age of twenty-eight, and commented: '*Ars longa est, vita brevis est?*' Art endures, life is short.

Perhaps this permanence of the arts gives comfort when immortality is rendered even less attainable by toys of mass destruction, evil or impatient leaders, and viral diseases both identified and mysterious. Taking it in sufficient dosage might even do us a power of good, seeing that 'art . . . differs from some of the most pleasant vices and pastimes by consolidating the organs which it exercises', to cite the *BMJ* again.

Yours affectionately

Robert-Ian

PS. I misquoted Hippocrates: a fellow Latin classmate remembered the Longbottom pun but corrected the quotation. '*Ars longa, vita brevis*', it should be: the 'ests' are redundant. I still think '*Ars Longa Est*' was inscribed above the entrance to the Music Block, but he has doubts about this too. Will investigate.

Further to Simon Rattle's migration to Germany. Just before leaving England at the end of March, I went to a 'rush-hour' choral concert in Birmingham's Symphony Hall — a wonderful auditorium both visually and acoustically, part of the Convention Centre: and until recently part of Rattle's 'beat' as conductor of the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. The present conductor indicated the city's long history of classical music and involvement with famous composers. Handel was the first guest conductor in about 1760, and others followed — not forgetting their own Edward Elgar. Mendelssohn was another — indeed, he could make so much money in England compared to his native Germany that he was continually nipping across the Channel to earn his keep. So the pendulum swings . . .

'Doc' has been in specialist physician practice in Pietermaritzburg for almost a quarter-century. As Robert-Ian Caldwell he performs musical revues and writes an 'Aunt Ethel' column for the local SAMANewsletter. He and his wife (doctrate in plant pathology) and three children are all past UCT students.