Commissioning television opera at the BBC, a historical case-study of accessibility through technology: Tobias and the Angel (1960), an opera for television

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Introduction

Darren Henley, the Chief Executive of Arts Council England, wrote in *The Guardian* newspaper in November 2022 defending cuts to funding of the English National Opera:

> A new generation of audiences is embracing opera and music theatre presented in new ways: opera in car parks, opera in pubs, opera on your tablet. New ideas may seem heretic to traditionalists, but fresh thinking helps the art form reimagine itself and remain exciting and meaningful to future generations of audiences and artists […] Our ask is that ENO, and other opera companies with pioneering track records, come together and invent a future for new audiences (Henley 2022).

Henley disputed that he and the Arts Council were anti-opera, but that opera needed to embrace innovative ways of reaching new audiences. As is so often the case with bureaucrats Henley was clear on the "what" but preferred to leave the "how" to those struggling to accommodate the financial cuts. However, as well as smaller-scale productions in non-traditional venues (car parks, pubs), he suggested embracing new technology (your tablet). This is nothing new, and the continued broadcast of opera to cinemas, from the Met in New York and Covent Garden in London, for example, demonstrates that increasing accessibility, in both the geographical and financial sense, is a possibility. This is, however, only a variation on a mode of dissemination of opera that has been around for many decades: opera on radio and TV. From its very earliest days, the BBC used both media to bring opera into the homes of the listener and viewer.

Jennifer Barnes in her book *Television Opera* (2003) outlined the history of opera on TV, from its earliest incarnation on the BBC as early as 1936. In her discussion of opera on the television, she drew a helpful three-way distinction between operas produced in the traditional way in an opera house and relayed on television; operas produced specifically for television in the studio; and opera films broadcast on television. She also drew a further distinction between these three varieties of operatic incarnations, and operas commissioned, written and produced specifically for the television medium. There is no dispute over the very first opera composed expressly for TV: *Amahl and the Night Visitors* by Gian Carlo Menotti, broadcast on NBC in 1951. As far as BBC TV operas are concerned, Barnes identified five commissions in the late 1950s. All of these precede the subject of this article, the television opera *Tobias and the Angel*, based on the biblical story from The Book of Tobit in The Apocrypha. This was commissioned by BBC TV from the composer Arthur Bliss and the librettist Christopher Hassall, and broadcast in 1960 in a production by Rudolph Cartier.

This article takes this early example of television opera, examines the way the medium of television interacted with and mediated the genre of opera, and in looking at the blending of the two art forms, asks some questions of Henley's plea to reinvent opera for a modern

audience. It draws on a variety of archival sources to explore how television technologies and institutional practices mediated the opera's composition, production, and reception. Musicians tend to use the quotidian shorthand for opera, identifying the composer as the only begetter of a work, so Mozart's *Figaro*, Wagner's *Tristan*, and so on. But all opera is a team effort, perhaps only matched by feature films in the sheer numbers of individuals involved, and Howard Becker in his *Art Worlds* (1982) has drawn attention to the network of artists and artisans that accumulate around art forms normally seen as the work of the lone genius. Likewise, Bruno Latour (1993) has helped to deconstruct apparently monolithic organisations, like the BBC, into a network of more-or-less heterogeneous individuals, each with their own tastes, prejudices, and agendas, along with the inanimate objects that they use in the course of their professional activities. It is this network of people and objects that make up what might be described as the machine of television production, and it is that machine that is the focus here. Taking a lead from one of Latour's followers, John Law, it is worth emphasising at the outset that this article is not a neat, positivist survey, but rather an untidy exploration of the subject from a variety of viewpoints. Law's book *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (2004) is fundamental to the approach, especially the "Mess".

A spotlight is shone on four key players in the creation of this opera: firstly, the librettist Christopher Hassall; then the producer of the opera, Rudolph Cartier; the Head of Music Productions, Television at the BBC, Lionel Salter; and finally, the audiences for the broadcast. Although the composer, Arthur Bliss, is intentionally de-centred, he is still a vital component in the creative apparatus, and it would be apposite to begin with a few words about him His response to the work of associates in making the opera will be a recurring motif. By the time he came to compose the score for *Tobias and the Angel*, Bliss had already been knighted, so he was Sir Arthur Bliss, and in 1953 he was made Master of the Queen's Music: he was very much the establishment figure, and at that time he would have had a reputation in the UK and abroad which might not quite match Benjamin Britten or William Walton but was nonetheless considerable. He had already composed an opera for the stage, *The Olympians* (1949), so he was familiar with the world of the opera house; and music for films, notably for *Things to Come* (1936), a sci-fi behemoth written by H.G. Wells, produced by Alexander Korda and directed by William Cameron Menzies: Bliss was familiar with the film world, where the composer is anything but the principal character.

The first of our four cogs in the television machine is the librettist, Christopher Hassall, who was operating very much as the individual freelance artist, teaming up with the composer to cooperate with the organisational Leviathan of the BBC, and sometimes to play David to the BBC's Goliath. The producer Rudolph Cartier was on the BBC payroll as a staff producer, but this was a role that operated much more like a freelancer, moving from project to project in different BBC departments. Nonetheless, he had an office, an assistant, a secretary and the other paraphernalia of a BBC executive. He was, technically, in overall control of both the budget and of the artistic elements of the TV production. Lionel Salter, on the other hand, was a BBC bureaucrat, and like Cartier he had a team around him, and at least one member of that team, Kenneth Wright, also played a crucial role in making *Tobias*. Salter and his office were responsible, first and foremost, for editorial and administrative issues, but, in the fuzzy managerial stye of the BBC, they were also involved in some artistic decision-making, some of it quite significant. Lastly, the audience, and more on that, or them, later.

The plan is to take a stroll through the production and broadcast, looking at what each of the actors did and said; how those individuals might have influenced the final outcome, the art object; take a look at the reaction of various parties, and finally draw some conclusions over

the success – or otherwise – of this example of that hybrid art form, the television opera, and what might be learned from the amalgamation of opera conceived for another medium.

It would be difficult to improve upon the brief synopsis of the opera's plot by Christopher Webber, in an article comparing the score as it was heard on the television in 1960, and as Bliss revised it for publication for performance on the stage:

> [Bliss and Hassall] chose the apocryphal Book of Tobit, a biblical "exile tale" set in Nineveh, which Hassall condensed to a sleek narrative centred on the mysterious manservant Azarias (Archangel Raphael in disguise) who journeys with Tobias to Ectabane, helping him overcome his youthful inexperience, fear and credulity to win a wealthy bride and cure his father Tobit's blindness. The Angel also defeats the powerful demon Asmoday, who has possessed the bride (Sara) and forced her to strangle her previous seven (!) husbands. The other characters – Tobias's parents, Sara's father and the proud Jewish singer-slave Rhezia – are neatly sketched in this first-rate libretto (Webber 2013, 1).

The first cog: Christopher Hassall

The actor and writer Christopher Hassall had collaborated with Bliss on previous projects, and it was to him that the composer first turned when the idea of a TV opera was mooted. Hassall is perhaps best-known today as the writer of six hit shows with Ivor Novello, during a 15-year collaboration, so he was no stranger the different but nonetheless related world of the West End musical. He was also familiar with the world of opera, having written the libretto for William Walton's only full-length opera *Troilus and Cressida* (1954). From the correspondence preserved in the BBC Written Archives Centre concerning *Tobias* it is clear Hassall was closely involved in all the decisions affecting the writing of the opera: choosing a subject, providing treatments and draft libretti, discussing the title, the producer, casting, cutting to time, and the scheduling of the broadcast. He was involved from the very beginnings of the commission, and from the outset, before the subject was agreed, he wanted to write a comedy. This would imply fast-moving, conversational dialogue, and there are elements of comedy in *Tobias* that reflect Hassall's wish, and the tone of the whole libretto manifests the same approach. Bliss agreed, that "it's generally accepted that music moves more slowly than the spoken word, but for the intimacy of television presentation I've found it advisable to set the text almost at the tempo of speech" (Bliss 1959). To what extent he succeeded in this will be seen.

It was Hassall who wrote an introductory article on the opera in *Radio Times*, the BBC's listings magazine. In it he made it clear that the opera was a completely original piece of work, distinguishing it from a 1930 play by James Bridie, a poem by Browning and paintings in the National Gallery, among others. The issue over the potential confusion of the title with the Bridie play occupied Hassall, Bliss, Salter and other BBC executives considerably, with many alternatives suggested and finally rejected. Salter and Hassall agreed that *Tobias and the Angel* was the best solution since Bridie's play was by that time 30 years old and mostly forgotten. Nonetheless, they agreed that Bliss, as the composer, should have the last word. Even the title of the opera was fed through the TV production machine. In his article Hassall outlined the story, stressing the:

> …curious mixture of down-to-earth naturalism and wildly improbable fantasy, and yet the whole thing hangs together and convinces us by its psychological insight as being true to human nature – human nature in any age (Hassall 1960).

This sounds very much like the TV dramatist pointing up the relevance of the story for the contemporary mass audience.

He further explained that the composer's score "heightens each situation and drives on the action with gathering momentum to the end" (Hassall 1960). And he praised Cartier's contribution "In the sphere of production, where especially imaginative treatment is needed to revive the strange splendours of a bygone age in history and make them real to modern eyes" (Hassall 1960). Hassall clarified what he saw as the essential constituents of a successful TV opera: relevance, dramatic energy, and imaginative production. He went on to mention the principal cast members, and the conductor Norman Del Mar. It is clear that he perceived Bliss, Cartier and himself as equals, and his preoccupations were much the same as any writer of TV drama.

The second cog: Rudolph Cartier

Cartier's professional title in the all the written archive materials is "producer", but at that time in BBC TV this would have incorporated all the administrative responsibilities of the producer with the artistic functions of the director, so Cartier and his office had direct control of the budget, casting, rehearsal schedules and venues, booking the orchestra and studios, and with oversight of the sets, costumes, camera scripts, duration, lighting, cameras and camera operators, catering and so on. It must be said that tracking the budget was a hit-and-miss affair: most of the budgets are written in biro or pencil on odd loose pages, with only one serious attempt at a complete breakdown of the costs, prepared by the Production Assistant, Paddy Russell. Even this "Final Budget" fitted onto a single sheet of foolscap, double spaced, and was signed off "Love, Paddy" (BBC WAC n.d.). It is worth noting that at this time virtually all television, however complex, was broadcast live, or if not live, then recorded as a one-off performance and then broadcast "as live". This latter option was how *Tobias* was eventually broadcast, which is why there is still a physical, extant copy of the programme.

Cartier was born in Vienna in 1904, and studied drama with Max Reinhardt, who believed a script was like a musical score, and should be interpreted by the director like a musician interpreted a score, an approach which Cartier embraced. He worked in film in Berlin, leaving for America with the rise of the Nazis, and settled in the UK in 1935. He started working for the BBC in 1939, but the BBC closed its TV operation for the duration of the war. He joined the BBC staff in 1952, having told the Head of Drama, his future boss, in his job interview, that the output of his department "needed new scripts, a new approach, a whole new spirit, rather than endlessly televising classics like Dickens or familiar London stage plays." (Jacobs n.d.). Cartier believed that the television medium should go beyond passively relaying, however efficiently, theatrical performances and needed to develop a language of its own. He made his name in a 1953 collaboration with writer Nigel Kneale, a sci-fi serial called *The Quatermass Experiment*, described in *The Times* as "a landmark in British television drama as much for its visual imagination as for its ability to shock and disturb" (Rudolph Cartier Obituary 1994).

Cartier became famous for pre-recording segments of his productions that would be impossible to stage live, and he did this in *Tobias*, when the hero fought with a giant fish, and in the battle between the angel and the demon. The complexities of shooting the scene with the fish, with its intricacies of continuity, to say nothing of the difficulties of hiring a public swimming pool, is documented in the BBC's files, and would take a short book to unpick. Suffice to say that for this scene, which lasts a little over two minutes, there are 46 pages of

continuity notes. The climax of the opera, the battle between the angel and the demon, was also prerecorded, and was similarly complex, resulting in the scene most redolent of Cartier's previous adventures in sci-fi. There is an anxious annotation to the editing notes for one of the takes: "I'm a bit worried about this one as I don't remember such a shot being taken and can find no record of it on the sheets!!!" (BBC WAC undated). Although there are some sci-fi elements to this production, principally in the battle between the angel and the demon, otherwise the direction is naturalistic, an approach which Cartier had pioneered at BBC drama.

There are some remarkable televisual techniques, radical for the time. After the climactic battle of the angel and the demon, Azarias's sleeping face is seen in close-up, his head resting on a low wall, and he is smiling. The camera pulls away to a wide shot and pans right, across the garden of Sara's palace. Then the slave girl Rhezia walks into shot from the right, and the camera follows her as she walks slowly back across the garden towards where Azarias is sleeping. She walks up a short flight of steps and wakes him. This unbroken shot is exactly two-and-a-half minutes long, a remarkable piece of television direction.[1]

Cartier's influence on the opera went beyond his aesthetic approach to TV direction. Bliss explained in his autobiography:

> Composing for television was a new experience for me, and I had to learn as I went along. Here my film experience came in useful, as the "duration of time" factor conditions the writing; conciseness is all. What might be lengthened to twenty minutes in the theatre […] would have to be shortened to (say) ten minutes in the opera house, and, when the medium is the screen, to very much less. I had the good fortune to have the experienced Rudolph Cartier to produce the opera, and in our first discussions the question of the duration of each scene came up. "Take your watch out", he said, "and see the second hand do its minute circle". I did so, and the time seemed endless; much could happen on the screen during those sixty seconds. I saw his point clearly (Bliss 1970, 207).

Like Christopher Hassall, Cartier's concerns were clear storytelling with energy and economy, where the visual presentation was just as important as the music. While it is clear from his work on *Quatermass* and other drama productions that he was instrumental in developing a language specific to the medium of television, and that he was opposed in principle to straightforward relaying of what was originally a stage production, his views on opera are not on record.[2]

The third cog: Lionel Salter

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[1] This shot is accompanied by the music which can be heard on the commercial CD of *Tobias and the Angel* (Bliss and Hopkins n.d.) from CD1 T25 0350-0440, to CD2 T1 0000-0140.

[2] Before *Tobias* Cartier had produced at least four operas for BBC TV: Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Saint of Bleecker Street* (broadcast 4 October 1956), Richard Strauss's *Salome* (broadcast 26 September 1957), Arthur Benjamin's *A Tale of Two Cities* (broadcast 2 October 1958), and Giuseppe Verdi's *Otello* (1 October 1959). Subsequently Cartier produced Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (broadcast 20 December 1962) and Thomas Eastwood's *The Rebel*, which was also commissioned by the BBC specifically for television (broadcast 4 April 1969). The British Film Institute holds viewing copies of the Strauss, Menotti, Verdi, Bizet and Eastwood. A comparison of Cartier's treatment of pre-existing operas with the specially commissioned *Tobias* and *The Rebel* would be a fruitful research project.

Salter's official title was Head of Music Productions, Television. From the archives, it is clear that he had two major preoccupations: firstly, the scheduling of the transmission; and secondly, its eligibility for the Salzburg Television Opera Prize. TV scheduling, then as now, is a byzantine process, and it is maybe not surprising that there were many months of wrangling over a transmission date for *Tobias*. This was due to annual budgets being spent, and other commitments in the arts schedule, including a transmission of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *The Gondoliers*, and a Shakespeare series. Perhaps less expected were issues of resources, such as studio availability, and the requirements of camera crews being available to televise an international boxing match between England and Scotland, to say nothing of Cartier's holiday arrangements. The assumption was that the opera would be broadcast live and recorded for the purposes of sharing it with the other TV stations involved in the Salzburg Prize. Even when *Tobias* had finally found its place in the schedules, for 5 May 1960, Buckingham Palace, no less, threw a regal spanner in the television works. It was announced that the marriage of Princess Margaret, the Queen's sister, to Anthony Armstrong-Jones would take place on 6 May, the day after the proposed broadcast of *Tobias*. The complexity of the rehearsals required for the televising of the Royal Wedding, and the resources needed, to say nothing of the blanket press coverage it would receive, meant that the opera would be lost in the noise surrounding the royal wedding. That meant that instead of a live broadcast, the production was recorded, and broadcast on 19 May, a fortnight later.

The Salzburg TV Opera Prize had been initiated in 1959, and Salter had his eyes on the prize from even before the opera was commissioned; in fact from the correspondence, it is clear that *Tobias* was commissioned specifically to be submitted for this inaugural competition, and to win the prize. In the BBC's file on *Tobias*, there are pages of memos back-and-forth with the organisers of the Prize over technical details, contractual arrangements, sharing of the prize money, fees for repeat broadcasts, Union agreements, and so on. Much of this administrative burden fell on the second-in-command in Salter's office, Kenneth Wright, whose official title was Chief Assistant to Head of Music Productions, Television. Wright was closely involved in the commissioning and production of *Tobias*. In a long memo from Wright to Salter, dated 23 December 1957, he gives an account of the very beginning of the process:

> You will remember that Christopher Hassall told me Bliss hoped to write a full-length comic opera with him for the stage.
>
> For this reason, and because you and I believed Bliss would not care to have a work of his "submitted" for the Salzburg Prize, I did nothing further.
>
> However, I did mention it in a recent Christmas note, which he has take [sic] more definitely than I intended, because he replied by return:
>
> > "I warmly welcome your invitation to write a Television opera for you. I will sound Christopher Hassall with whom I should most like to work, and if he is agreeable will accept your very complimentary offer ….. After Christmas we will begin to examine possibilities".
>
> It so happened I met Bliss this morning outside B.H. and he repeated the above sentiments, admitting that so far he has come up with no definite decision on story or subject although he has several in mind; he wants to meet us after Christmas to talk, and says he is agreeable, (a) to choose a story and treatment suitable for our medium,

> i.e. employing smallish resources; (b) to choose a human subject likely to appeal outside this country as well as to our own viewers; (c) to having the work considered in relation to the Salzburg competition.
>
> I suggest it may be worth our while to pursue this; Bliss has shown in his earlier works that he can work on a "compressed" or miniature scale, and his enthusiasm, once aroused, enables him to drive on with a project once started. His name is international and he is anxious to learn about our medium rather than dictate what television should do (BBC WAC 23 December 1957).

This reiterates, firstly, that Hassall and Bliss worked closely together, and indeed, Bliss was concerned that Hassall should be invited to meetings to discuss putative plans from the outset. Secondly, it is a reminder that the idea of a comedy was already under discussion. Further, it suggests that Wright and Salter had already discussed the idea of submitting something for the Salzburg Prize but felt that Bliss would not be keen to have his work scrutinized in this way. He was, after all, the Master of the Queen's Music, and may have felt that this was beneath his dignity. What was not beneath his dignity was writing an opera for television. Bliss was abreast of the times and presumably relished the challenge of writing for this flourishing medium, with the possibility of a mass audience. He had been quick to recognize the significance of broadcasting and the BBC, writing an article in the BBC magazine *The Listener* in 1932:

> The BBC has grown in ten years to be the greatest music-making machine, by a very long chalk, that has ever existed: so immense indeed has it become that only a comparison with some great industrial concerns producing its thousands of tons of steel or gallons of oil can give any idea of its varied and tentacular existence. […] It is appalling to consider the problems involved in this mass-music organization, in the laying out of a schedule that shall run to plan for a year. It is even more alarming to dwell on the human contacts involved. […] It administrates in a public concern supported by a ninth of the population, listened to and criticized by more nearly a fourth; consequently, in theory at any rate, it has to give that fourth just about what it wants, or get out (Bliss 1932).

It is noteworthy that Bliss couches his discussion in the same terms as this article, likening the BBC to a huge machine, some industrial colossus, and sees the network of people involved as an essential part of that machine. Perhaps this is simply the composer picking up on the Zeitgeist of "The Machine Age". His concern for giving the members of the audience what they want is also pertinent in the context of his writing an opera for television.[3]

This article, and his conversation with Wright, reveals his understanding of some of the requirements of writing for the mass media, his immediate consideration of the needs of an audience, both at home and abroad, and his willingness to submit to the jury in Salzburg. However, his grasp of the television medium only went as far as subject matter and resources, and did not begin to address Cartier's vision of an innovative language specific to the needs of the small screen. Bliss and Wright had discussed the necessity of catching the words clearly on first hearing, and although Bliss had originally agreed to a small orchestra – Wright had explained that Menotti had achieved "excellent dramatic and lyric effects in *The Medium*

[3] This article was about music on BBC radio: the BBC Television Service was not launched until 1934, two years after Bliss's article. Bliss was later to work on the staff of the BBC during the Second World War.

with solo string quintet" (BBC WAC 29 July 1958) – by the time he came to write, he wanted a largish chamber orchestra: the booking for the London Symphony Orchestra was for a string strength of 8.6.4.4.2; double wind; four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba; plus timpani (BBC WAC 18 November 1959). On the other side of coin, Wright was explicit in what Bliss brought to the BBC: international credibility, a flexibility in approach, and the ability to write to a deadline.

Wright was engaged throughout the composition and was involved in the painful business of cutting the work to length, when the libretto and score were almost complete, and it became obvious that the work overran a sensible duration for a television broadcast. In a memo to Harold Fielding, Bliss's agent, dated 28 January 1959, he wrote:

> …although the Bliss opera is almost complete, it has proved far too long. The composer is very collaborative and has undertaken to compress the work (with advice from the producer and ourselves) to the right length of an hour. Its present form is really conceived for stage, on which it must ultimately be produced. This means, however, that we have had to take it out of our schedule at the end of May, and it may not be produced until well into next season. It is a pity to miss the Salzburg Competition in August, but wise to hold it back until we know it is right and will make its best effect (BBC WAC 28 January 1959).

This partly explains why the opera was not submitted for the 1959 Salzburg Prize, when the BBC offered *The Spur of the Moment* by Guy Halahan. It also reveals that although Bliss had been commissioned to write the opera for television, Wright acknowledged that its afterlife would be as a work for the conventional lyric theatre, an afterlife that has yet to come about. In an undated document in the same file, Wright provided notes on a playthrough of the work-in-progress on 21 January 1959 for him and Salter, outlining their suggestions for cuts to the score. Just a few days before, Wright was more explicit about why the opera would not be put forward for the 1959 prize. In a letter to Cartier, dated 8 January 1960, he explained that at the playthrough of the first four scenes of the opera (four were still to come) the duration was already an hour. He went on:

> Another thing that worries us is the rather dull uniform plodding of the music, and in general the slow tempo of all speech or dialogue. It is true that he has not overlong sentences, but there are innumerable unnecessary gaps which bring everything to a funereal pace, and I must say I am very disappointed. Bliss repeatedly said to me a few days ago that he realised there might be a necessity to re-write some of it, and I think we must press hard for this even if it means scrubbing the transmission until the Autumn – it is hardly the stuff for Salzburg anyhow, I am afraid (BBC WAC 8 January 1959).

Dull, plodding, funereal, disappointed. Ever the diplomatic BBC executive, Wright followed this up to the composer the very same day:

> My dear Arthur,
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> […] I have just been through your first four scenes with Lionel, and while it is hardly necessary to say we like lots of things about it, we are very worried about the tempo and length of the whole thing. Our timing of these scenes was about one hour, and I think we were not as inaccurate as all that. I suggest that you get together with us and

> Rudolf [sic] Cartier as soon as we can manage it, because you were good enough to say you realised it might be necessary to do some re-shaping or re-writing, and if the whole thing is to come within the original proposed time of from 60 to 75 minutes, there will have to be some compression and speeding up. Naturally, too, we want to be as much help to you as we can, and certainly no hindrance. Critics can be an awful nuisance if they are not really helpful (BBC WAC 8 January 1959).

It is often necessary to read between the lines of letters between tactful BBC staff and sensitive individual artists, but here the message is absolutely evident to those able to see both letters. Whether it was as apparent to Bliss is open to question. Nonetheless, what is clear is that Wright and Salter were prepared to go back the Master of the Queen's Music and demand rewrites in order to get what they wanted, even if the request is dressed up in hints and allusions. Bliss's response to Wright can only be seen in the music as it finally appeared. There is a good deal of fast-moving conversational writing in the lighter moments of the opera, for example in the opening scene at the slave market, Act 1, scene 1.[4] The climactic scene of the opera, Act 2, scene 1, the battle between the angel Azarias and the demon Asmoday, where Azarias is revealed to be Raphael, which Cartier had suggested should last no more than a minute, actually stretches to nearly two.[5] The love duet between Sara and Tobias, which follows, lasts rather less.[6]

Wright had been at an early meeting with Cartier and Bliss, after the commission had been made, but before Bliss started composing, when Cartier pulled the trick with the minute hand on the watch, and Bliss was instructed that the music needed to be fast-moving, simple and clear, and the words needed to be audible on first hearing. In the same memo, recording the meeting, Wright wrote:

> It is unlikely the Salzburg Competition will discover or create any musical masterpieces like [Falla's] "Master Peter's Puppet Show" or [Ravel's] "L'Heure Espagnole", but it would be nice to hope it might. What might come out are a handful of musical dramatic works which give both aesthetic pleasure and entertainment by using music not unworthily in a medium which is the most powerful of the New Age (BBC WAC 29 July 1958).

A pretty fair manifesto for television opera as an afterthought in an official BBC memo.

The fourth cog: The audience

Hassall, Cartier and Salter were three significant players with three different, if not actually conflicting, agendas (four if Wright is included, and five with Bliss). The responses of the various audiences to *Tobias and the Angel* are illuminating in that they reflect each of those agendas in different ways. Although the opera was made with the television audience at home very much in mind, there are other significant audiences to consider here: music professionals, the critics, and the wider BBC management.

The raw numbers of the TV audience speak from themselves: 3 million people watched the programme, nearly 6% of the entire UK population. There was a detailed Audience Research Report from the BBC, asking viewers what they thought of the programme. They gave *Tobias* an overall rating of 68 out of a possible 100. The average reaction index for opera and

[4] CD1 T2.
[5] CD1 T25 0222-0410.
[6] CD2 T2 0000-0144.

operetta, taken over the previous two-and-a-half years, was 67. The breakdown of more detailed responses is divided into those referencing the storytelling, the music, the singing and acting, and the production. Those in the storytelling category were almost all positive. Some of the respondents:

> …said that this was the first time they had been "carried away" by an opera […] the plot commended itself to the majority of viewers in the sample as relatively straightforward (for an opera), masterly in its treatment of such incidents as the fight with the monster fish and Sara's "possession" by the demon Asmoday, and having, in its narrative aspect, qualities that were fascinating and most moving as well (BBC WAC 19 May 1960).

The music, however, was not so popular. One viewer described it as "pleasant but undistinguished", another found it "hard to discover any tune", and another "no melody, just moanings". On the contrary, another said "It was understandable, suitable to the various situations, pleasing to the ear, and within the scope of the normal singer." The singers were said to be "sincere and convincing", and the production was thought to be "eminently skilful and imaginatively-planned" (BBC WAC 19 May 1960). The overall impression is that the opera was appreciated best as a television drama, and that the music did little to add to the experience.

Bliss received a number of letters from fellow-composers and other professional musicians, all of whom were complimentary; it should be remembered that Bliss was quite the establishment figure, and as Master of the Queen's Music, held some influence. Congratulations came from, among others, Gordon Jacob, Alun Hoddinott, and Joan Trimble, who wrote:

> The music, in particular, seemed to be exactly right for the medium. It was full of colour, lyricism and excitement; at the same time the dramatic action was heightened – most important for many listener-viewers – one never felt the time passing – it was all over too soon! (BBC WAC 21 May 1960).

The composer and conductor Eugene Goossens was full of enthusiasm, but as a professional himself, he recognised that the medium and the message were not always easy bedfellows:

> I sat entranced last night listening to (and watching) "Tobias" and marvelled at your "expertise" in handling what must have been a most difficult and cramping assignment. I think you've written some lovely and <u>stirring</u> music, and the whole thing seemed to hang together with great compactness. I see no reason why, with one or two modifications, the opera shouldn't, and couldn't, be transferred straight to the live Opera House. Undoubtedly the crowded screen constricts the big musical "line" of your music. The theatre would give it the spaciousness it calls for, and which is inherent in it. Congratulations, Sir Arthur, you are a valuable pioneer….!! (BBC WAC 20 May 1960).

Goossens's positive tone here masks the real message. He understood that the medium cramps the message, and recognised that the opera, as an artwork, would be more comfortable in its natural home, the opera house. Describing Bliss as a pioneer implies a brave, possibly foolhardy, effort, rather than a success. Another conductor, Rudolf Schwarz, saw and heard it differently:

> Musically strong, vivid, moving […] and typical Bliss at his best – but not only this, it was Television at its best. For the first time one had the impression that there is a true opening for TV-Opera if designed and directed solely to that goal […] may this score only be the first of many more to come! (BBC WAC 19 May 1960).

This endorsement was probably the only completely positive critical advocacy for the future of television opera.

Among professional critics, the best reviews came from television drama critics, rather than music specialists. For example, in the BBC's own magazine *The Listener*, Irving Wardle, wrote:

> I don't suppose the B.B.C […] will be much put out by the contemptuous dismissal of Sir Arthur Bliss's Tobias and the Angel in certain normally enlightened sections of the press. […] Only the accidents of economics and architecture make opera a minority art, and it is rank sabotage to attack the only organisation that is doing anything to make it generally accessible. Even if the work were no more than competent it would deserve sympathy; but, in fact, the achievement is impressive. […] it was a new work by two eminent collaborators who […] without condescension, set about writing for an unsophisticated audience. The production bore the unmistakable signature of Rudolph Cartier, the brinkman of the BBC, whose experiment this time took the form of injecting opera with the Sci Fi effects he pioneered in the Quatermass serials. Pungent have been the animadversions on these; and I, too, did not care overmuch for the spectacle of Raphael and Asmoday battling through the firmament in the likeness of two longer-life bulbs in a spot advertisement (Wardle 1960).

Wardle put the case for making opera accessible via the medium of television clearly and recognized that Bliss and Hassall had modified their approach to the requirements of a TV audience. The music critic Martin Cooper, writing in *The Daily Telegraph*, thought that "Television opera proper […] will surely have to develop a new shorthand of musical expression, with its own symbols and conventions" (Cooper 1960). Another music critic, Peter Heyworth, in *The Observer* wrote:

> I have no idea of how the formidable problems of creating an opera specifically for television are to be solved. But I cannot believe that a solution of any sort lies in the direction of Sir Arthur Bliss's **Tobias and the Angel**. […] Rudolph Cartier's production falls with a dull thud between the clichés of conventional opera and a corny old silent film (Heyworth 1960).

If you thought that was bad, the chief music critic of *The Sunday Times*, Desmond Shawe-Taylor went with his fellow critics to a preview showing. He subsequently wrote to Lionel Salter to apologise for not writing a review:

> The sad truth was that I thought both text and music so feeble and pointless, as a work of art, that it seemed better to say nothing than attempt to wrap up my feelings in polite phrases (BBC WAC 22 May 1960).

Ouch! This last only addresses the opera as an abstract setting of words to music, completely swerving the issue of production, but Heyworth and Cooper agreed, implying that television

opera would make specific requirements on librettist, composer and director, which Hassall, Bliss, and Cartier had only partially fulfilled.

Cartier received some letters of encouragement from the viewing public, for example from Mrs Vivienne Edwards, who wrote:

> …to congratulate you and everyone else concerned with last night's opera "Tobias and the Angel". It was a pleasure to watch something so beautifully done, singing, scenery, costume were all so good, and the special effects were most convincing (BBC WAC 20 May 1960).

Any comment on the music is conspicuous by its absence. But it is impossible to ignore one letter, from Mrs D.B. Hodgson, of Newmarket in Suffolk, which, after praising the music, singing and production, pointed to one serious fault in the production: "In the Apocrypha it says – 'And the young man's dog went with him', but there was no sign of this faithful animal in the opera" (BBC WAC 20 May 1960). The delights of working for the British Broadcasting Corporation, the nation of dog-lovers – and pedants.

The reaction of the BBC management was no more than lukewarm. Although a photograph from the production featured in the BBC Handbook for 1961, where the opera was mentioned as a highlight of the year in television music, the programme was not repeated, and although Bliss made a version for the stage, as Eugene Goossens had suggested, hoping that the opera might enjoy a life beyond the one-off television production, it has yet to receive another performance. From the BBC's point of view, the opera had been a technical, rather than an artistic success. Cartier himself, after a subsequent viewing of the recording of the opera, wrote a memo:

> I am writing to say that I was absolutely staggered by its superb quality, both in picture and sound, and must say it was by far the best telerecording I have seen.
>
> This video tape can be shown everywhere as a shining example of what can be achieved by BBC skill and experience and it could be used as a test piece both for lighting and sound engineers because of its quality. I feel that this tape should not be wiped for the above reasons and also because there is no way of predicting that the opera will not be re-transmitted in the future – either at home or overseas (BBC WAC 13 July 1960).

Cartier's appreciation of the sound is not unreasonable. The complexities of balancing an orchestra in one studio with the singing actors in another must have been considerable. The television sound was necessarily compressed and limited to accommodate the rather rudimentary mono speakers in domestic sets of the day. It is impossible to gauge how much the balance was controlled manually during the recording, and how much was left to the technology; it seems likely that BBC engineers at that time would have been using a Pye 4060 compressor/limiter, a piece of equipment that was still popular in the late sixties, for example at Olympic Studios in London, where the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin were recording. Andrew Rose, the restoration producer of the commercial CD, commented:

> … for live TV sound of this era it's still remarkably good. A lot of work has gone into getting as clean, full and clear a sound as possible here, and despite a lack of very

> high treble and some peak top-end distortion (largely tamed), it has come out very well (Bliss and Hopkins n.d.).

The Music Organiser Television, Owen Thomas, followed Cartier's memo up with another concerning the future of the programme:

> This tape was retained until the producer could see it. We had then asked that H.M.P.Tel. [Salter] should be consulted before it was finally wiped. We now want the tape to be retained as a special case for another year. The reason for this is that in our view, technically the quality is superb and it can be regarded as an excellent example of what tape recording can achieve with a production which was most demanding in terms of pictorial and sound requirements.
>
> S.E.Tel.Film [Senior Engineer Television Film] agrees with us about this and he would be very happy if the tape were available for demonstration to visitors from other broadcasting organisations. There is no doubt that in the next year there will be many such visitors, interested both in the opera itself and in the quality of tape recording (BBC WAC 14 July 1960).

Whether the programme was used as a paragon of television production is hard to discover. It is also difficult to know whether it was broadcast elsewhere. Its submission for the Salzburg Prize would suggest that it might have been, although in the copious correspondence concerning the prize it was only mentioned that the winner would be broadcast by the participating TV station. It was never repeated on BBC TV. A commercial CD of the soundtrack for the opera has been released, to some positive reviews, for example David Chandler called it "a very fine opera […] can some opera company please just go ahead and stage it?" (Chandler n.d.). Christopher Webber agreed that the opera should be produced in the opera house, and went further: "this compelling work […] deserves to rank with the ballets amongst Bliss's most personal artistic achievements" (2013, 4).

But what of the Salzburg Prize, so very much the focus of Lionel Salter's attention? *Tobias and the Angel* was awarded…second prize.

Conclusion

Whether *Tobias and the Angel* is an early example of the happy comingling of two different art forms, television and opera, or a car crash involving them is, in the light of the responses of the various audiences, a moot point. Perhaps the lesson from Latour and Law is that it depends very much on whose perspective is taken.

The BBC did continue to commission operas for TV, as did other broadcasters around the world. Barnes listed operas commissioned for television in the USA 1951-2002, and post-*Tobias* there were 14 (2003, 103). The only one of these which has remained even on the periphery of the repertoire is Stravinsky's *The Flood* (1962) and this is heard, when it is heard at all, in the concert hall rather than staged in the opera house. *Rachel, La Cubana*, by Hans Werner Henze, was written for NET in 1974, and has been resurrected as *La Piccola Cubana* in a chamber version for the stage in 2022 at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin. Schott has published a suite, described as "Lieder und Tänze aus der Operette "La Cubana" (Henze 1993). It is telling that Barnes's list ended that year, 1974. In her list of television opera commissions in the UK, there were six operas commissioned by Channel 4 Television in 1994 and 1995 (2003, 104). As she explained, Channel 4 wanted operas that would only

work on television. One composer deliberately ignored this stipulation, and Gerald Barry's *The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit* has had a stage production at the 2002 Aldeburgh Festival, followed by performances in London and Berlin. This loss of interest from television in opera is telling, as is the subtitle of Barnes's book: "The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television". It is that word "fall" that gives the game away. One of Barnes's case studies was Britten's *Owen Wingrave* (1971), with *Amahl* the only opera specifically commissioned for the medium which has entered the repertoire, and which was designed by Britten from the start to embrace the possibilities of television, while keeping an eye on its future in the opera house. The original TV production was released on DVD in 2009, and another production, made for Channel 4 in 2001, was released on DVD in 2013. An outlier is Tippett's *New Year* (1989), jointly commissioned by the BBC, Houston Grand Opera (USA) and Glyndebourne Opera (UK). Tippett, who was a devotee of popular television, especially soap operas, said he was partly inspired by the teen drama *Fame* and – with a nod to *Tobias* – the sci-fi series *Blake's 7*. *New Year* was premiered in Houston, given subsequently at Glyndebourne, and this production was broadcast on BBC TV in 1991. Channel 4 has subsequently commissioned operas from Judith Weir, *Armida* (2005), and Jonathan Dove, *Man on the Moon* (2006).

The continued support that the BBC and other broadcasters gave to opera throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s would imply that there were people working for these organisations who had faith in the union of the two media. *Tobias* was never repeated on the BBC, and Bliss was not offered another opportunity to write for television. He had his chance and blew it. Among the professional musicians who wrote about the work, Schwarz and Goossens agreed that Bliss had put down a marker for the genre of the television opera, Schwarz with rather more enthusiasm than Goossens. The latter implied that what Bliss had achieved was to demonstrate that it might be possible to write opera for the television, rather than that he had succeeded in doing so. Similarly, the music critics Cooper and Heyworth did not question whether there should be opera on television, and that it had a future, but only that whatever Bliss, Hassall and Cartier had come up with was not it. It would be illuminating discover whether the audience for opera on television were already opera mavens, or newcomers. If the latter, did their engagement with opera on television encourage them to visit the opera house?

In 2015 ABC TV (Australia) commissioned a four-part mini-series, *The Divorce*, in association with Opera Australia, described as a comic soap opera with music by Elena Kats-Chernin. This was described in a review as:

> …a desire to broaden the appeal of this supposedly most elitist of art forms – and what better way than on the box? But the question that presents itself – particularly to me as a professor of vocal studies and opera – is whether the ABC and Opera Australia have succeeded in this attempt to merge artforms? […] [H]as the ABC and Opera Australia succeeded with The Divorce? […] [I]f opera is through-composed music, minimal dialogue and vibrato-laden voices, then this ain't opera. But does it matter? […] This is light, fun entertainment with some poignant moments and attractive performers. […] In the end it doesn't matter what one calls The Divorce, and it will certainly be worth tuning in to the next three episodes (Halliwell 2015).

Perhaps this is the answer. Given that productions in the opera house still occasionally make their way onto the small screen and are regularly given in cinemas, it is not that opera on screen is impossible, but rather that writing an opera for television is not viable. When a composer, with a librettist and director perhaps, conceives of writing something – not an

opera or soap opera, not a drama with music, nor any other hybrid of existing genres – but something that can only exist in the medium of television, or a video game, or on an iPad, then there may be an opportunity for some new art form. At which point Darren Henley can celebrate that a musical genre, if not something that could be described as opera exactly, might find a new audience through the invention of an original artistic category.

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