

COMMAND PERFORMANCE OF "GLORIANA"

EVEN before the Lord Chamberlain intervened in his capacity of censor of plays and modified the stage directions of *Gloriana*, this new opera of Benjamin Britten was news. On any ordinary occasion of that description can be applied to the first night of a new opera. Covent Garden would have been packed. For the Coronation gala performance it was indeed the Royal Opera House, graced by the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh and their 25 guests, and packed by Commonwealth representatives, ambassadors, and the distinguished in music and the other arts.

Those who knew where to look amidst the blaze of plush and gilt finery, the jewels and flowers, could have seen Mr. and Mrs. Holland and Sir Frederick and Lady Doidge, though it must be admitted that even New Zealanders spared them only a glance.

As the audience turned, at a fanfare of trumpets, to the Royal box, it seemed as if one of those legendary nights of the Edwardian golden age of opera had returned. In those days a Royal gala would have meant tit-bits from respected Italian favourites: this night it was to be a completely new work by an English composer whose previous six had something of a Wordsworthian freshness after the cramped conventions of the rhyming couplet.

With either a new opera or a new - and full - Royal box, it would have been an occasion. With both, this was a Rare Occasion.

Cloth of Gold

To give a better view than the old Royal box, rows of seats were torn out in the centre of the Grand Tier for a new box lined with cloth-of-gold and lit by lamps held by figures of St. George and Britannia. Behind this the bar was replaced by a tented Royal retiring room banked with roses.

Three chandeliers hung there by courtesy of an insurance company. Why? Last time Covent Garden had a gala, the chandeliers were lent by an antique dealer who had meantime sold them for the insurance company's board room. The directors agreed to more mundane, if modern, lighting temporarily.

Equally spectacular work back stage provided more gasps-per-entrance than for many years. *Gloriana* is nothing if



IN THIS scene from Benjamin Britten's Coronation year opera "*Gloriana*," Queen Elizabeth I (played by Joan Cross) is seated under the canopy at left

not spectacular, and even Elizabethan ladies-in-waiting wore dresses with 15 yards of royal blue velvet, while soprano Joan Cross as the Queen was haloed by a gigantic ruff 35 inches wide and 20 inches deep. There are dozens of ruffs scarcely smaller, each requiring yards and yards of fine gathered horse-hair and golden thread, in addition to 393 costumes in glowing velvets, silks and specially-woven shot taffeta. This all contributed to a production cost of about £15,000

By J. W. GOODWIN

More Pageant than Drama

"The costumes are wonderful," said Miss Cross, "but it's heavy going for three hours, carrying clothes which weigh as much as a solid, healthy child of four." And it's heavy going for the dressers also, for the technicalities of Tudor clothing have been mastered from drawings in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and there are no concealed zips to facilitate quick changes.

With such wondrous doublets and farthingales, with masques and a court ball, and Elizabethan jigs and ambles, it is not surprising that some critics should have complained that there is more pageant than drama. But there is all this and Britten too, and it is a Benjamin more prodigal with his tunes than usual.

What do they know of Merry England who only Britten know? In this case, quite a lot. The story, by the novelist William Plomer, is of the ageing first Elizabeth, known to her almost adoring subjects as *Gloriana*, and her favourite, the wayward Earl of Essex. Suitable subject or not, in the circumstances, it has an undeniable piquancy with something of the devastating candour of Lytton Strachey—perhaps not a bad thing in Coronation year when royalty is in danger of being considered more than regal.

One of the touches of inspired originality is the first exit from her court of

old Queen Bess, flinging herself heavily but triumphantly up the shallow stairway, and with three deliberate, magnificent gestures grasping the halberds of the soldiers to pull herself up. Later there is an almost intolerable sense of excitement produced by an urchin in red and yellow tatters dashing back and forth across a street to whisper the latest, and perhaps treasonable, rumour into the ear of a blind ballad singer.

Musically the opera marks another stage in the exceptional career of a composer who is always stylish and technically brilliant, and this time there are more concessions to those of us who have not always found his works easy listening. There are many songs which one wishes to hear again, particularly the sensuously beautiful lute songs which echo Tudor harmonies without any "old-tyme" clichés.

Banned "Business"

It was a piece of typical Tudor "business" which provoked the intervention of the Lord Chamberlain. When the irresponsible Essex is declared a traitor, he attempts to rouse the citizens of London against the Queen, but is spurned by a housewife with a deluge from a bedroom window. The censor decreed that the stage directions should be amended and a bedroom basin substituted.

That this minor part should be played by Edith Coates is an indication of the lavishness with talent. Covent Garden had to find 17 principals and a cast of 140, headed by two friends of the composer, Joan Cross and Peter Pears. Small parts were given to singers who normally sing major roles such as Monica Sinclair, Jennifer Vyvyan, Adele Leigh, Geraint Evans, Arnold Matters, Frederick Dalberg, and our own Inia te Wiata.

If the theme of *Gloriana* lacks the sympathetic qualities which transmute simple emotions into a great passion, if there is not the engulfing experience of opera at its grandest, at least a delicate subject has been treated with clever and audaciously original strokes of operatic craft. It was worthy of the first opera premiere to be given Royal patronage at Covent Gardens for more than 200 years.



PETER PEARS
"No 'old-tyme' clichés . . .



BENJAMIN BRITTEN
beautiful melodies . . .



WILLIAM PLOMER
undeniable piquancy"