

DIARY OF THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO
presented by Southern Grammar School for Boys in autumn term 1962

compiled by Tom McCanna when he was in Lower Sixth Modern

*In 1961, I had taken part in the production of *Iolanthe*. This was the social and emotional high point of my school career, so when I heard that we were to put on *The Marriage of Figaro*, I decided to keep a diary of all the preparation. Here is an abridged version, omitting personal details and much of the boring lists of what was practised each time, but retaining material which should bring back memories of the period.*

In the original diary, both staff and boys usually only have surnames, as was the customary usage in those days. In editing, I've sometimes clarified the situation by adding a "Mr" for staff and replacing first names with surnames for boys. I've interspersed the chronological account with a few biographical details I made at the time.

Wednesday 28th June 1962

Learnt from Chris Butchers of Mr Tom Russell's intention to stage *Figaro* next year. Chris was in the Upper Sixth, and had just done the opera as an A-level set work

Tuesday 24th July

Russell announced that we are going to put on *Figaro* next December. Handed my name into Mr Williams.

Monday 17th September

Russell asked for auditions, from those who have acting ability but not necessarily singing ability. Went along during break. He liked my voice, and put my range down as low G to high F. He asked which part I preferred. I said Bartolo – "His aria's been cut. What about Figaro?" – "That's rather long." – "You've taken small parts before." – "Only in the chorus of *Iolanthe*." As I was going out, Graham Lawrence came along for his audition.

Wednesday 19th September

Went to first practice. Tenors and basses sang Figaro's three arias in unison, then divided into "Counts" (tenors and light baritones) and "Figaros" (the rest, including me), to sing the Finale Act II from "Now tell me, Master Figaro" to "Twisted my foot in my fall".

Thursday 20th September

Went to dramatic audition after school. Learnt that we are doing Russell's own translation of the Beaumarchais play. The parts seemed to go as follows- Lawrence (Cherubino), Taylor (Curzio), McCracken/Samphire (Figaro), Harding (Count). Maddison made a good Manurio, but he has a good bass voice, so will probably become Bartolo.

<p>Derek "Dinge" Harding was in Upper Sixth Modern, taking French, German, Latin plus Russian O Level. Consul, high rank in CCF, captain of athletics (sprinter and jumper), had been captain of soccer team in 4th year, captain of rugby XV. Founded and directed school choir. Organist and principal bass at St Cuthbert's. Had played Mountarat, Octavian and roles in miracle plays. I first knew him as an athlete at Langstone School, where he set Portsmouth-wide records. High baritone. Very good at leading conversation.</p>
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Friday 21st September

Went to practice. The Counts' final notes of each phrase sounded highly operatic. This amused Russell, who turned and grinned after every cadence. McCracken is definitely going to be Figaro.

Hugh McCracken was in Upper Sixth Econ, taking Geography and Economics. Senator, captain of soccer first XI, distance runner. Made a splendid Figaro, a difficult role with its changes of mood. Very powerful voice, but not sure of his singing.

Monday 24th September

Went to dramatic audition after school. At the very beginning Williams went up to Maddison and had a short talk to him, after which Maddison went home. He then began allotting parts for reading. "McCanna, you're playing Bartolo. Is your voice right?" I don't know whether he meant this as final. Other parts went as follows:

Harding (Count), McCracken (Figaro), also read by Samphire, Sloman and Fairfield (Basilio), Elloway (Antonio), Taylor (Curzio), Dimond (Countess), Fenton (Barbarina and Marcellina), Lawrence (Cherubino), and Such (Susanna).

Graham Lawrence was in Removed Science A. Rugby player, gymnast. Played piano and French horn, sang in Milton Glee Club & St James Church Choir. I first knew him as Iolanthe. Very nice light baritone voice, probably best singer in the school as he had effortless high notes to F sharp, and perfect sight-reader. Described by one master as "a nice fellow, but too full of bounce", so right character for Cherubino.

Dave Taylor was in Removed Econ. Senator, ex rugby player, in school choir. Light baritone, but preferred to sing bass. Made the most of the funny part of his role. If anyone was handing rounds sweets or cigarettes, he somehow managed to join the group.

Wednesday 26th September

Went to practice. Fairfield was recalled from the tenors to sing bass; this may be an indication that he won't be Basilio. Only one tenor out of the eight so far enrolled can sing high A flat.

Thursday 27th September

The list of cast was pinned up during assembly. Fairfield is Bartolo, Maddison Manurio, and I Double-Hand. This disappointed me, as now I can't sing on stage. However, Samphire, who hasn't even got a part, must be even more disappointed. Female roles are Pyle (Countess), Humphrey (Marcellina) – he is a big boy, whose voice seems to be near breaking point, Fenton (Barbarina), Such (Susanna) who is a charming boy who reads and converses well, and will look good as a girl on stage without fringe and glasses.

We had a meeting to discuss rehearsals and sets.

Ian Maddison was in Upper Sixth Science. Senator. Had training as soprano, now a bass with good falsetto. Very keen on voice training, and often told me I was straining my voice, and would soon ruin it. [*Well, I was still singing both tenor and bass to my mid-sixties*]

Friday 28th September

Went to practice after school. Mr Sims took the tenors to practise by themselves (there were only five). The rest were split into Figaros, Bartolo-Antonios, and Counts. I am a Bartolo, together with Elloway, Fairfield, Samphire and Riches.

According to Russell, a first-year had asked him why the Count wanted to marry Susanna when he is already married to the Countess.

A list of rehearsal times was posted up.

During the term there were regular stage rehearsals (typically Monday lunchtime, Mondays and Wednesdays after school) and music practices (Wednesday lunchtimes, Friday after school).

Thursday 4th October

After assembly, Fairfield and I were drawn aside by Williams and asked to swap parts, because "Fairfield is too mild". He was obviously disappointed, but managed to appear willing.

Went to rehearsal after school, in the Music Room because the orchestra was in the Hall. Cherubino's aria, *Tell me fair ladies*, is to be sung as a soprano song, probably by Susanna with side chorus.

The Headmaster always pronounces the name "Feegaro".

Friday 5th October

Went to practice after school. There were so few basses that Russell did his despairing act – "If we're not going to get the support, I'm going to pack it in." He had done this quite often during *Iolanthe* practices. However, he was quite pleased by the sound we produced.

Monday 8th October

After assembly Russell held a meeting to moan about attendance.

Samphire will almost certainly be Antonio, as both Russell and Williams have mentioned that Antonio's part will be omitted until he returns from Yorkshire, where he is on a geography field trip.

Adrian Samphire was in Lower Sixth Econ. Senator, rugby player. Pleasant baritone voice. Ended up knowing most of the opera by heart. A natural comedian. His performance as the drunken Antonio was very convincing, and even used real beer.

Wednesday 10th October

Went to rehearsal 7.00-8.40pm. No senior boy wore regulation school uniform to the rehearsal : Harding, for instance, had a dark blue shirt with no tie.

Tuesday 16th October

During dinner-hour went to session for measuring for costumes. I appear to be 5' 11" tall, size 7 hat, 9 shoe, 14½" collar, and I forget the vital statistics. Humphrey was 44-39-43!

Wednesday 17th October

Went to rehearsal in the evening, the first with music. Six or seven Peasants turned up, so we went through the end part of Act I. We also did the first two scenes of Act, and most of Act III. John Russell was made Pedrillo, Riches the Usher. The latter has a fairly small voice – so there was no overpowering bellow of "Silence" to stop the rhubarbing courtroom.

Paul "**Fred**" **Riches** was in Lower Sixth Science B. I had known him for seven years, starting in St Cuthbert's Church Choir. Played viola and piano. Athletic, often ran home after rehearsals.

Friday 19th October

Went to rehearsal in evening. During an interlude offstage we managed to wake Samphire up by singing - we didn't even know he had arrived till then. He had been asleep on a sofa. After this, he sauntered across the stage, and when he was required to come on drunk, we had to wake him up again, this time he was asleep on the floor behind some props.

During this week a notice went up on C staircase noticeboard calling for stage assistants and carpenters. The four main principals get practice regularly, and the rest of us only occasionally during rehearsals. Such goes for a practice every break; next week he is to practise with Lawrence for their Duet.

Friday 26th October

Went to practice after school. The tenors have had all their high notes cut.

Went to rehearsal during evening, which lasted nearly two hours, in which we did Act IV twice. Russell was rather irritable, and nearly threw Maddison out bodily for talking behind him. When Williams mentioned that the lights shine on the arbour to reveal the inmates watching the action, I pointed out that Cherubino and Barbarina should be snogging. Williams seemed shocked, but Russell and the cast were amused.

Tuesday 30th October

Had head measured for wig.

Thursday 1st November

Went to rehearsal in evening. The Peasants also came. The stage was full of flowers left over from a fashion parade in the afternoon; these hindered our movements, but provided a good “pot of carnations” for Antonio. As usual we returned home as if inebriated, with Lawrence and me singing at the top of our voice.

Monday 5th November

Our production of the opera won't appear natural to the audience, because of the solos being sung with choir. However, as the opera is being put on for our benefit, not theirs, it doesn't matter. In Russell's words “It's to let as many boys learn Mozart as possible.”

Friday 9th November

Went to rehearsal in the evening. Pyle was absent, so Fenton took his place where possible. Beforehand most of us did acrobatics on the lighting platform. Russell was very pleased with our progress. He commented on Fenton's excellent speaking voice.

<p>Robert Fenton was in 2L. Had an alto singing voice, and a woman-like speaking voice, but looked boyish in costume. Good actor and a friendly person.</p>
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Monday 12th November

Went to rehearsal during dinner-hour. There was so much noise from the carpenters that it was difficult to hear oneself speak.

Went to rehearsal after school. Russell refused to let anyone use a score on stage. He had one outburst at Samphire for a sloppy entry in Finale Act II – “Look, don't waste our time. I want to get home to tea.” Soon after that he was saying that he was willing to go over any piece a thousand times if necessary. The most amusing part of Act IV has become Humphrey's performance. He is most unfeminine, and acts sometimes like a conspirator, sometimes like a music-hall actor.

<p>Alan Humphrey was in 2K. Violinist. Good baritone voice, but sang in a weak falsetto. Grossly overacted, a natural comedian who sent the side chorus into fits. Threw his weight around a bit, but always cheerful.</p>

Wednesday 14th November

Went to rehearsal after school. We went through the Peasants' bits. The Fandango dance step is now "1 2 pause", which looks ridiculous.

Saturday 17th November

Went to rehearsal in evening, with Peasants. Such had a stomach ache, and disappeared in the direction of the toilets when he should have been on stage – "Where's Susanna? She's got to let Cherubino out of the closet." – "That's where *she* is."

On one occasion when the sopranos should have been singing, Russell threw a paper-bag at a boy who wasn't paying attention. The boy immediately looked inside and was disappointed to find it empty.

Julian Such was in 2K. Gymnast, violinist. Lovely lyric soprano voice, and good actor, though couldn't walk like a girl. His aria was the highlight of the show. One night when he was in costume I inadvertently addressed him as a girl. He replied "I'm a boy. Everyone says I'm a girl, but I really am a boy."

Monday 19th November

Went to rehearsals at dinner-time and after school. No one uses a script any more, and Russell will not let us have scores on stage.

Tickets will be on sale from Wednesday, priced at 1/6, 2/6 and 3/6. Large adverts for them have appeared around the school. Mr Butterworth has been constructing scenery for a couple of weeks. Act II scenery is nearly finished; the walls have been papered. Wilf Jefferies was to have begun painting the backcloth for Act I today. Act III needs no scenery, and no one really knows what is to be done for Act IV.

Wednesday 21st November

The orchestra is to be led by Miss Solomon, who went through bowing all the violin part yesterday night till 2 am. [*I found this out at my violin lesson with her*]. The members of the school orchestra have had a private practice after school on Wednesday for the past two weeks – that concerns Mr Hitchens, Mr Watson (drums), Mr Newton (piano), Mr Barlow and Stent (clarinet), Bradbury and Warmington (trumpet) and presumably Mr Hobbs (flute). Two French horn players have been found to relieve Lawrence [*They were recruited from the Royal Marine Band, and provided professional reliability to the orchestra*]

The Countess's aria in Act III has been cut down to just the Recitative and Andante. Maddison will no longer be able to play Manurio, as he is going to London Medical School. John Russell takes his place, and probably Wheeler Pedrillo's.

Thursday 22nd November

Basilio's signature song is now to be the seduction duet from Don Giovanni, sung both going off and coming back in Act III, with the words

"Where is my Marcellina?
She should be at my side.
I've such a lot to tell her,
My dainty little bride."

Pete Sloman, who played Basilio, was a prominent member of the Portsmouth Ban the Bomb movement, and (he said) a Buddhist. Had spent nights in prison after demonstrations. Had high tenor voice up to C sharp, though he didn't use it, and didn't join in the side chorus. A convincing

actor. Spent much of the rehearsal time reading, and didn't know some details of the plot even after the final performance.

Friday 23rd November

Went to rehearsal after school. We did Finale Act IV. It didn't go at all well, and Russell got very annoyed, and thumped a few boys who weren't paying attention.

Saturday 24th November

Went to rehearsal in evening. We did Finale Act IV, better than yesterday. Russell again got annoyed with a couple of boys.

Monday 26th November

During assembly Butterworth announce that he wanted some old panes of glass to break.

Wednesday 28th November

During violin lesson, Les Lander and myself sang most of the opera to Miss Solomon's accompaniment, then she and I went through most of it alone. Apparently, at last Friday's orchestral practice the prestissimo was taken at about half speed, which was still pretty presto for many players. However, Russell intends taking it at about the speed he has taught us, at least minim = 192. This moment in the opera is the most thrilling, with its crescendo run-ups like screams.

Thursday 29th November

Went to rehearsal after school. We did Act II (music only). The final ensemble went off well, and Russell broke his baton trying to beat two in a bar during the prestissimo. We reached the impossible pace of about minim = 240. At one point Russell was defending a bad-tempered outburst, and said "Oh no, I didn't." At once the sopranos replied like a pantomime chorus "Oh yes you did!"

Went to make-up lesson as a guinea-pig. A female instructor made me and McCracken up.

During this week, Wilf Jefferies has painted a wall and trees for Act IV.

Friday 30th November

Went to rehearsal after school. The rehearsal was over by five o'clock, so Russell kept the tenors and basses behind to do some extra bits. Dimond also stayed behind, and sang Susanna's part all by himself, but still making himself clearly heard against the voices of 25 men.

Peter Dimond was in 2L. Although not in the cast, turned up regularly to principals' rehearsals, where he enjoyed climbing around backstage. Knew opera by heart. Would probably have got the role of Countess if his acting had been better. Strong alto voice, but sang soprano. Pianist.

Saturday 1st December

Went to rehearsal in evening. Mr Newton turned up in a donkey-jacket, jeans, and smoking a pipe. Mr Bolge, who has taken an interest, brought along his tape-recorder; he's something of a prude, and looked most hurt when Russell cracked a joke about getting a thrill from both the music and the piano-stool.

Tuesday 4th December

Robinson is now to be Lackey instead of Atkinson.

Thursday 6th December

Went to rehearsal after school. We did the whole of Act II, repeating most of the music. The scenery was up for the first time, so we had a lot of fun opening doors, and Cherubino “did himself a mischief” jumping out of the window four times.

During the past week, Williams and Russell have been making alterations to the original music and text to accommodate persistent faults and lack of style.

Friday 7th December

Went to rehearsals in morning and afternoon. All the side chorus turned up, so we arranged to sit as we should be on the night. There will be no room for the orchestra unless we commandeer another four rows of seating – which leaves just twelve rows for the audience. Mr Davies (publicity manager) announced that 58 girls were coming to one performance, much to everyone’s delight. Such’s solo was well applauded. Near the end, Henry Mills came in and watched: did he notice me standing on the stage wearing a bright blue pullover?

Most of the acting was done with scenery. Act I has a backcloth with two doors, a mirror and a chandelier, with two side flats with doors (from Act II). Act II is a proper room with two side doors, a window and a door leading to a genuine closet; the wallpaper is gold and white. Act III has just bare curtains, which are not wide enough at the side, so every time anyone goes on, the backstage is revealed [*during the actual performances, stage-hands sat with their feet on the bottom corners*]. Act IV has a wall with a gateway surmounted by two pineapples, with side flats of trees and flowers.

The marriage bond is a piece of paper inscribed with “Quanta qualia etc.” Scott rings a bell from the Games Department in Scene I. Lawrence is to play the offstage hunting horn. The armchair for Act I is too small, but it will have to do [*a larger one was found for the actual performances*]. We will have three unlit lanterns in Act IV.

Scott, on curtain duty, hurt his hands trying to close the curtains in 5 seconds flat at the end of Act II.

Saturday 8th December

Went to rehearsal in evening. When Cherubino jumps from the window, Butterworth breaks a pane of glass in a most realistic manner.

Going home, Harding, McCracken, Taylor and Sloman (all on foot), Lawrence, Riches and myself (on bikes) sang carols and bits of the opera. When Dunge had gone into his girl-friend’s house, we all crept back and sang *Good King Wencelas* outside his door, disturbing at least three neighbours. [*The pair did get married – how did Derek manage to fit so much into his life?!*]

Monday 10th December

We had a meeting in the morning to make final arrangements for the dress rehearsal. During Period 6 all the male characters had to try on their costumes, which had arrived during the day, but without shoes. I have to provide my own black shoes with yellow buckles.

Went to **DRESS REHEARSAL** in evening. Arrived about 5.50. Stripped to waist in Gym, had make-up wash in Changing Room 2, went to Music Room and completed make-up. I looked dreadful, completely unrecognisable. Then put on costume, finally back to Music Room for wig, which is black and curly.

As the rehearsal started 20 minutes late, it was cut in several places, although some items were repeated. We finished at 10.45.

Several cues were missed. The orchestra did better than I had expected. There were two bassoons, who “yelped like sea-lions”, as Lawrence put it. The chorus often sounded weak, although everyone was singing loud. I had a sore throat by the end. There was a photographer who took a lot of photos, some posed beforehand, others during the performance. Pyle looks very good in make-up, and Lawrence makes a convincing peasant girl.

David Pyle was in 3K. Keen on indoor football. Shy but cheerful. Voice on the verge of breaking, so unable to do full justice to his solo.

Wednesday 12th December

Went to **FIRST NIGHT**. The audience stretched back well into the Dining Hall.

Scott was very nervous during the Overture, and had his hand on the curtain-winder about 5 minutes earlier than necessary. There was no applauding for choral numbers in Act I.

In Act II, *God of love* was very poor, went flat and sounded thin in the sopranos, out of tune in the orchestra. The Duet got a lot of laughter. Antonio also got laughs when he came on. The end of the Act was an anti-climax, because a) the Prestissimo was slower than usual, b) someone in the orchestra played at the wrong moment, c) the curtain didn't go across until the music had already finished.

Act III went very well. The Letter Duet was well applauded. From then on to the end of the Act it was fine, although the orchestra sounded out of tune during the Wedding March [*Mozart deliberated scored this to sound like a rustic band*]

Marcellina got quite a lot of laughs in Act IV, as expected. Susanna's Aria had the most applause for any item, with even Russell joining in. She was very embarrassed, and hid her face. As it was the first time we had had the curtain across at the end, Basilio and Curzio both got left outside. We had two curtain calls, the second to clap the orchestra and side chorus.

The performance was over by 10.25. Afterwards I cycled home in the sleet.

Thursday 13th December

Went to **SECOND NIGHT**.

In Act I Basilio was sitting in the Gym drinking coffee when he was supposed to be on – silence, then Williams read out “His Lordship is not in his apartment.” Two lines of dialogue, another pause. Eventually Basilio entered, from the wrong side.

God of Love was better today. The Duet between Susanna and Cherubino was moved downstage, but this meant that Cherubino had to take a running jump out of the window, instead of putting his foot on an imaginary sill. Antonio consumed a real bottle of beer in the Act II Finale. The ending was better than yesterday.

During the interval we principals went into the Staff Room to have a cup of tea with staff and guests.

Atkinson returned as Lackey in place of Robinson. The audience appreciated the Court Scene, and Act III went very well. Marcellina's business in Act IV was very amusing. She lifted up her leg at the end of “philosophy, dear mother...”.

There were a few noticeable mistakes tonight. The Count came in too early in Act II, Figaro's voice cracked during his recitative, the door got stuck on our entry in Act II.

Afterwards I went home on the cold clear night, with Harding and his girl-friend, then McCracken, and finally cycling with Lawrence along the sea-front (“Pylons and seas are all around”!!).

Friday 14th December

After dinner-time we all went to a meeting, when Russell told the sopranos to watch him and sing better than they have done for the past two nights, to “shock the audience and make the show a real success”. Nearly everyone who has seen it has enjoyed it, including Henry Mills. But there was a very poor write-up in the *Evening News*.

Went to **THIRD NIGHT**.

Before the Overture, Russell asked the audience to be more appreciative than on previous nights, as this would encourage the singing. They certainly responded, with applause after every song, and also whenever a character went offstage. They also laughed more freely. The whole show was the best yet.

McCracken took *Yes fools you are* as a solo tonight, and sounded good, though some words came out in the wrong order.

Saturday 15th December

Went to **LAST NIGHT**. I arrived at 6.00, with a bottle of cider. [*At the last night of Iolanthe, the producer Mr Mercer had plied all the cast with cider*]. Russell again addressed the audience, but his speech was interrupted by the orchestral lights going out, which delayed the start.

Lawrence played proper tunes on the offstage horn – *Peter and the Wolf*, and *Hancock’s Half-Hour*. The door stuck again when we entered in Act II. During the Sextet, Figaro pointed at Marcellina when he sang “this is my father”, so he had to point to me as his mother.

In the interval, I went to fetch my bottle, and was spotted by Mr Grant. I told him it was a prop, and threatened not to go onstage if it was confiscated. I ended up keeping it my locker. Meanwhile, Messrs Chatterton and Davies were apparently crawling round the Gym looking for beer. I hid in the side-chorus for the Finale.

Susanna gave the best performance yet of her aria, and got an encore. At the end, Russell came up and gave Susanna a bouquet. Then Susanna gave a box of something to Mrs Williams, Figaro a book-token to Mr Williams, and the Count a bottle of brandy to Russell (which he had got well through by the time I left). Also applauded were the orchestra, Mr Butterworth, the side chorus (especially the sopranos), and the audience.

On the way home we came across some of the Peasants singing carols. Eventually Graham Lawrence and I ended up at Hugh McCracken’s house to finish my cider. I got home by 12.30.

We’re all sad the opera is over, as it has been very enjoyable rehearsing in each other’s company. On a personal level, I’ve become intimately acquainted with a masterpiece, and have grown to love Mozart. I’ve largely overcome stage-fright. I’ve even become quite famous in the school, and hear whispers of “There goes Dr Bartolo”. And best of all, I’ve made friends who share my passion for music.

After getting to know the opera so well, I was able to see myself through A-level music the following year. I ended up working in the library of a University Music Department, where I was surrounded by fellow enthusiasts.