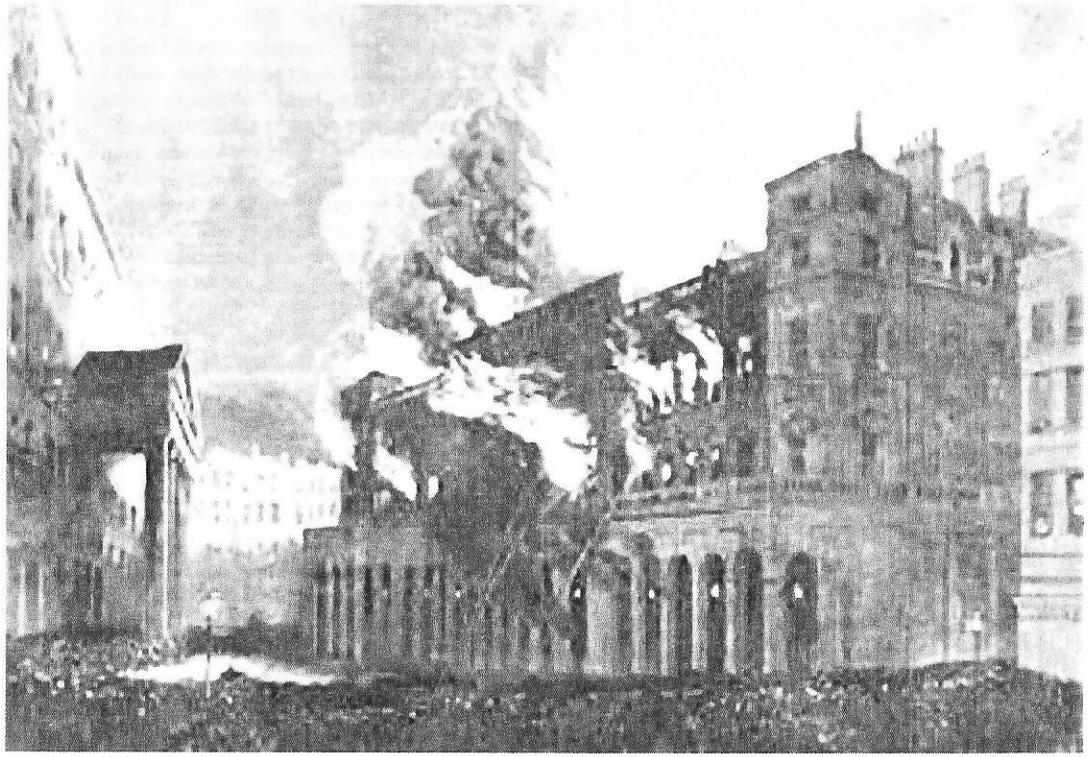


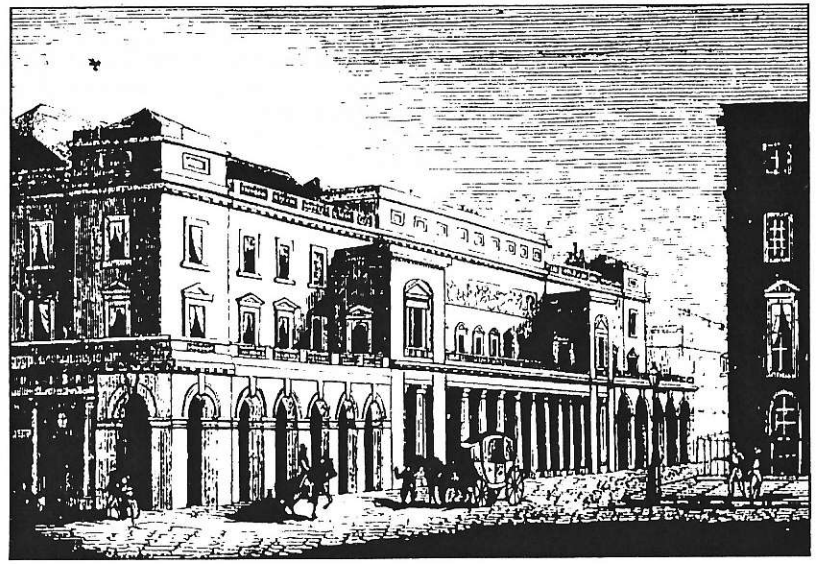
Past, Present and Proposed No.15

Pip Clayton

Four theatres, The Queen's, The King's, His Majesty's and Her Majesty's in the Haymarket

The Second Theatre part 3

The second theatre had opened in 1791 and by 1818 with the completion of the colonnade around three sides of the building and the Royal Arcade on the fourth side the King's Theatre did look a most impressive edifice. (**illustration 1. 1843.**)

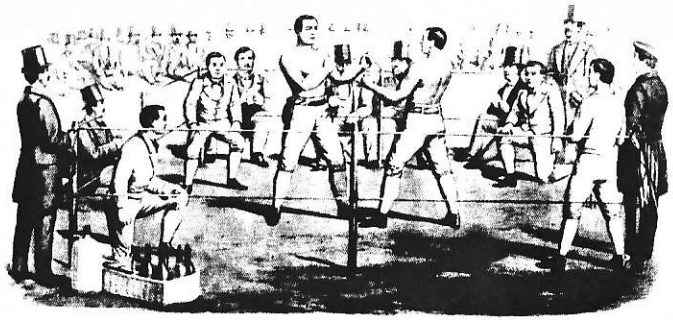


However when researching these articles I became very aware of all the changes and rebuilding that took place. As early as 1825 one of the external walls was in a parlous state and near to collapse and had to be demolished. Digging down to strengthen the foundations, the original foundation stone for the Queen's Theatre of 1704 was discovered. Perhaps the biggest change was in the auditorium, in 1809 the boxes and the proscenium arch were radically altered and then again in 1825, not satisfied with this arrangement it was all demolished and completely rebuilt at a later date. The forward thrust stage also saw change by being altered to a straight frontage behind the proscenium arch or a curved edge in front of it. The area backstage must have been a nightmare for artists and stage-hands. The management built a large room as a Green Room not for the artists but for subscribers to meet and hold a social gathering. The principal singers and première danseurs demanded private dressing rooms while the chorus and corps de ballet were left to dress and undress in whatever private space they could find. There were one hundred stage hands to operate the machinery for scene changes and effects. In 1850 over one hundred extra stage hands were recruited to handle the sets and transformation effects in Halevy's *La Tempesta*. The auditorium had to be cleaned and repainted regularly due to the tallow candles, patrons

complained of wax dripping on their clothes and gas jets were installed and patrons complained of the hiss from them A gas chandelier hung from the dome and at one time all three forms were in use at the same time. Both audience and performers had to contend with the young men of fashion who had more money than sense who paraded in Fop's Alley. This was a central aisle that run from the back of the Pit up to the orchestra rail and throughout the performance they talked to one another, greeted friends even waved handkerchiefs at those in other parts of the house. But by 1860 Fop's Alley was finally done away with. As for the posh lot they drew the curtains of their box played cards, gossiped or took tea served by their servants until it was time to open the curtains and listen to the latest star singer or to admire the curves of the young dancers.

New Management

Lord Ward, the Earl of Dudley after ousting Benjamin Lumley in 1858 had closed Her Majesty's and did not reopen the theatre until 1860 when he leased the theatre to a Mr E.T. Smith who was then the lessee of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. He also owned the Alhambra Theatre in Leicester Square, the Cremorne Gardens in Chelsea and various restaurants, a shrewd business man but was not interested in opera and engaged John Mapleson to manage the theatre. Smith had an eye for making money and he advertised in the Press that after the first World Title fight the two boxers would be seen at the theatre the following evening. The fight which was bare knuckled and illegal took place between the Englishman Tom Sayers and the American John C. Heenan just after dawn on the 17th April 1860 at a secret location somewhere in the country. **(see illustration by Currier & Ives.)** It might have been illegal but in the crowd of spectators was Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackery, Lord Palmerston the Prime Minister, and the nineteen year old Prince of Wales. The two bruised and battered pugilists were seen in a box the following evening drinking Brandy and Champagne but they left after the first act. Because Smith put all the proceeds from his different venues into one bank account no accurate tally could be made as to what money belonged where. Mr Smith's tenancy came to an abrupt end when he accepted a bribe of £4000 from the management of Covent Garden not to give a season at Her Majesty's in the year 1861



Enter now the second person who had a profound impact on opera in England during these early years. This was John Henry Mapleson and unlike Benjamin Lumley there is a lot of information about him which is available to the public, so just a brief description of his career and influence in the world of opera during the second half of the nineteenth century, not only in London and the provinces but also in America. He was born in May 1830 and at the age of

fourteen he became a student at the Royal Academy of Music where he studied the violin and piano. In the 1848 and 49 seasons he played in the
orchestra at Her Majesty's. In the autumn of 1849 he organized his first group of musicians which included Henrietta Sontag, Enrico Calzolari, Luigi Lablache and the pianist Sigismund Thalberg to tour the provinces. After a concert at Salisbury they visited Stonehenge where in the light of the moon Sontag sang *Casta Diva.* For the next three years he went to Milan to study singing with Alberto Mazzucato at the Conservatorio. Returning to England in 1854 he appeared at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in Auber's Masaniello. He was a failure, the Morning Post had this say, *The cast was excellent, with the exception of Mr Mapleson, a young gentleman who undertook with considerable imprudence the part of Alphonso. We have rarely met with a person so thoroughly inexperienced in the ways of the stage and venturing a character of importance.* Two years later he opened an agency in the Haymarket engaging artists for both Lumley at Her Majesty's Theatre and Frederick Gye at Covent Garden. In 1858/59 he managed Mr Smith's opera seasons at Drury Lane and then the last one in 1860 at Her Majesty's. He must have felt certain of his ability to run an opera house as in 1861 he took the Lyceum Theatre for his first season as an independent manager. The first opera to be given was *Il Trovatore* on June 8th followed on the second night by *Lucrezia Borgia.* But the biggest test was the English premiere of Verdi's newest opera *Un ballo in maschera* on the 15th. The artists in that first season season included Therese Tietjens, sop., Maria Alboni, con., Antonio Giuglini, ten., Enrico delle Sedie and Edouard Gassier, baritones. Other operas heard were *Norma* and *Les Hugenots*, the season closing on July 6 with a loss of £1.800. Mapleson had thrown down the gauntlet with a vengeance, the management at Covent Garden took notice and the infamous Gye - Mapleson rivalry began.

Early in 1862 he obtained a lease for Her Majesty's Theatre for twenty-one years from Lord Dudley with a deposit of £4000 on the understanding this was a deposit to remain as security for the rent during his tenancy. Lord Dudley thought otherwise and demanded a further £4000 to be paid before he could enter the theatre. This extra amount was borrowed from a friend, a Mr Mitchell. (In all my research this is the only mention of a Mr Mitchell that I have come across. But I think it may be John Mitchell who run a theatrical agency who together with a Mr Ashton started the oldest theatre ticket agency in London until its closure in 1982.) There was no new opera in that first season, which opened April 26 with *Un ballo in maschera* followed by *Semiramide* on May 1. Another singer whose name has rung down over the years joined the company, this was the French mezzo-soprano Zélia Trebelli who made her London debut as Maffio Orsini in Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* on May 6. A revival of *Robert le Diable* with new scenery and costumes was produced on June 14, but a promised revival of Weber's romantic opera *Oberon* did not. But an oddity was given on May 24, this was Verdi's cantata, *Inno dei Nazioni* composed for the opening of the 1862 Exhibition but had been rejected by the Royal Commissioners (and Michele Costa). It is for chorus and a tenor solo written specifically for Enrico Tamberlik, who was then singing at Covent Garden. Gye refused to release Tamberlik to sing at Her Majesty's and as Verdi was in London the score was altered to suit Tietjen's voice. Its première followed a performance of *Il barbiere di Siviglia,* all the company of singers sang in the chorus and the whole cantata had to be repeated. There were five further performances.

. The Gye - Mapleson Rivalry and the Year of Faust

That petty refusal by Gye was not the first time he had sabotaged Mapleson's plans. In 1861 Mapleson had heard a young singer and decided to engage her for his season at the Lyceum. She arrived in London together with her brother-in-law Maurice Strakosch who acted as her manager earlier than expected while Mapleson was still on the continent. But before the

contract prepared by Mapleson could be signed, Gye had loaned Strakosch £50 for which he asked for a signed receipt. When Mapleson returned Straosch told him that he had borrowed £50 and on looking at the so called receipt it turned out to be a contract for Adelina Patti to sing exclusively at Covent Garden. An attempt to break the contract was unsuccessful and Patti became the main singer at that opera house apart from a couple of seasons, until 1885. Many years later on inspection it was found that contract was invalid as at the time of signing she was underage. The following year Gye attempted to lure Thérèse Tietjen's away from Mapleson by giving her a contract to sign with where the amount she would receive conspicuously blank. She had carte blanche to fill in whatever sum she liked. Tietjen's replied 'I have given my promise to Mr Mapleson, which is better than all contracts'.

And so we come to 1863 the year of *Faust*. Gounod's opera had premiered in Paris at the Théatre Lyrique in 1859. Mr Gye had gone to Paris to see it and it made no impression him, in fact he said there was nothing in the music except the "Chorus of Soldiers." The music had been bought by Frank Chappell on behalf of his brother Thomas the English music publisher from Choudens the Parisian publisher for the little sum of 1,000 francs (about £40). Mr Mapleson also went to Paris and felt convinced it would be a great success in London but then found that Chappell's had approached Gye for a production at Covent Garden which after a little consideration he refused. Chappell's now offered Mapleson the right to give *Faust*, even offering £200 towards the production costs. Mapleson went back to Paris and purchased the score from M. Choudens, together with the orchestral parts and the rights of performance for the opera. He also visited Gounod who agreed to come to London and superintend the production. Back in London arrangements were put in hand: Tietjens was to sing Marguerite; Antonio Giuglini the title role; Zelia Trebelli was to be Siebel; the French bass-baritone Edouard Gassier Méphistophéles and the English baritone Charles Santley was to take the role of Valentine. In the meantime Gye had been busy explaining widely how he had turned such a "poor opera" down. As a result only a few seats had been sold before the opening night. When Mapleson asked the box-office staff how sales had been, he was told there was "no demand and only a few seats sold". He then had a brilliant idea. The opera would be given four nights in a row and that for the first three no more tickets were to be sold, if any one wanted a ticket they were to be told it was sold out and if they asked for the next performance that also was sold out. What happened of course is that word got around and the public started to buy tickets for later performances. Mapleson took the tickets for the three performances and distributed them far and wide around the suburbs. He also took the ticket agencies into the plot and placed advertisements in The Times of tickets "returned for sale". The first performance was on June 11 but not to a full house and at the end was well applauded but not with much enthusiasm. By the fourth night the house was packed and the demand was so great that it was given for a further six nights in succession.

So successful was *Faust* as a result of this ploy with both the press and the public that Mr Gye had second-thoughts and decided to produce it at once, it opened at Covent Garden on July 2 with Marie Miolan-Carvalho (creator of the role) as Marguerite and with Tamberlik in the title role. It had six performances before the close of the season on Auugust 1. Not content with the result Gye now attempted to obtain payment of £800 for each performance given at Her Majesty' Theatre and also of those given in the provinces during 1863 and 1864. Mapleson refused and Mr Gye brought an action against him.

The hearing was finally ended when it was found that, owing to some error in regard to registration, no exclusive rights of performance could be secured for *Faust* in England by anyone. The only loser was Gounod as he received no royalties. These productions created discussion and arguments as to their merits, at Her Majesty's the prayers of Marguerite take place *outside* the Cathedral and is followed by the death of Valentine and at the finale Faust is saved, whereas at Covent Garden the original order is restored. An argument for and

against still takes place today. In January 1864 during the winter season at Her Majesty's *Faust* was given in English and the tenor Sims Reeves took over the role of Faust while Charles Santley as Valentine had the new cavatina, 'E'en the bravest heart' to sing.

The main season of 1864 opened on April 9 with Rigoletto, ten days later Giuseppe Garibaldi the Italian patriot was in London as the guest of the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland and was among the audience to hear Tietjens as *Lucrezia Borgia*. Two operas had their London premiers in this season the first on May 3 was Nicolai's *Merry Wives of Windsor* given as *Falstaff* with Tietjens as Mrs Page, the second was Gounod's *Mireille* on July 5.

In 1865 a number of structual changes were made to the auditorium, the number of private boxes was

reduced and the remainder were enlarged, also the proscenium boxes were removed and the drop curtain advanced by about sixteen feet thus enlarging the stage area. Only one new opera was presented in this season, Cherubini's *Medée* with of course Tietjens in the title role. Among the new artists who were making their debut in London that year were Ilma di Murska as Lucia di Lammermoor on May 11 and a Signor Foli as Saint-Bris in *Les Huguenots* and Second priest in *Il flauto magico* (This young Irish bass, real name Alan James Foley soon became a favourite and during his time in London and sang over sixty different roles at Her Majesty's, Covent Garden and Drury Lane). Just before the close of the season Mr Gye struck again. He had leaflets printed and they were placed on every seat which read as follows, (note how he has the audacity to promote his own name but gives the Earl a minor role)

Mr Gye has the honour to announce he has transferred the proprietorship of The Royal Italian Opera, Covent Garden to a Public Company.
Mr Gye will occupy the position of General Manager.
The Company has now made arrangements for purchasing of The Right Hon. the Earl of Dudley his Lordship's interest in Her Majesty's Theatre, Haymarket.
The Prospectus of the Company will be issued in a few days.

No new operas were given in 1866 but the revivals included *Don Pasquale, Iphigénie en Tauride, Il Seraglio, Semiramide, Ernani and Lucrezia Borgia*. Making a return after twenty years to revisit the theatre of her early triumphs to sing this role was the great soprano Giulia Grisi. The performance was on May 5. (The Prince and Princess of Wales were in the Royal Box.) She seemed to be in command as always and sang the two verses of 'Com'è bello', but omitting the cabaletta, but signs of nervousness were seen. At the end of the prologue where Lucrezia is taunted by her victims Grisi sank to her knees. Unfortunately she was cut off-by the fall of the curtain behind her. Suffering with arthritis she was obliged to appeal to the stage attendants in order to rise. In the first act all went well, but at the end of the trio she made an unsuccessful attempt to reach a top note which left her confused. At the very end of the opera she approached Mapleson and told him '*that it was all over, and that she could never appear again*'.

Also in 1866 Gye tried to put into effect his printed leaflet from the previous year. But it was stopped by an injunction against him obtained by a Colonel Brownlow Knox to stop him from dealing with Covent Garden as his own property. This gentleman was one of Gye's wealthy subscribers and in 1860 had guaranteed £5000 so that Gye could manage Covent Garden on his own. Gye took the money, but it appears the Colonel saw no return for his

money, resulting in a number of legal actions instigated in 1861 which it appears were never resolved satisfactorily.

Another of those magical names from the history of Her Majesty' theatre made her debut on 8 June in 1867, this was the young Swedish soprano Christine Nilsson when she sang Violetta in *La traviata* and it was a further point of history in London as this was probably the first time the cast had been dressed in modern costumes. Other roles in which Nilsson appeared to increasing success were Flotow's Martha, Queen of the Night, Marguerite and Donna Elvira in *Ernani.* It was a good year for Verdi, it seems he was beginning at last to be appreciated by press and public alike. At Covent Garden there was *Un ballo in maschera* and a new production of *Don Carlos,* while at Her Majesty's *La traviata, Ernani, I Lombardi* and on June 22, the London première of *La forza del destino*,

But it was a bad year for Mr Mapleson. The Winter season opened on October 26 and he had engaged a femail harpist, only to receive a 'Round Robin' from the orchestra threatening to walk-out at the end of the week unless she was replaced by a male player. Mapleson answered this by insisting on receiving the week's notice for any change which he was entitled to receive. He then took out a court summons against every member of the orchestra. On the day of the hearing the musician's solicitor excused his clients as they had not been able to prepare their case. The Trade Union Movement then in it's infancy, flexed it's muscles and promised the musicians unlimited support towards maintaining their strike!

At last the case was heard, the Magistrate deciding to give his verdict later. But fate stepped in. The following events cast all this in the shade. Near the end of November Mapleton's Insurance Broker urged him to insure all the properties in the theatre, ie scores, scenery costumes etc. On the morning of December 6 he called again to write the Policy but was told that the value of the costumes had not yet been ascertained. Mapleton agreed to insure for £30,000. The insurance agent then suggested a payment of £10 which would hold the Policy on account until the following Monday. Mapleson declined. That same evening the theatre was seen to be on fire and by morning all that was left was a smoking ruin.

(see: The fire! p31)

Only the Opera Arcade behind the theatre escaped unscathed (and survives to this day). According to Mapleson in his Memoirs he was ordered to 'keep out of the way' while the fire-fighters smashed their way in. Mapleson also asserts that it took three hours for the fire to reach the offices etc., to which he held the keys. Thus it is quite clear from newspaper accounts of the fire that a lot of records, scores etc., could in fact have been saved.

The only person to benefit was of course Lord Dudley via his buildings insurance. This was surely a case of the very old and famous dictum: 'For the want of a nail!'

But in the eyes of History the Golden Age of Opera was at an end.

