

# From barn to Bayreuth

*Martin Graham started off as a builder's mate. Now he owns and runs the exciting and ambitious Longborough Opera. ALEXANDER CHANCELLOR met him*

**NO ONE WHO KNOWS** anything about Martin Graham could say that this country lacks social mobility. For here is a man who started life as a builder's mate but has transformed himself into a grandee in that most elitist of social worlds – country house opera. More than that, Mr Graham and his wife, Lizzie, have achieved an ambition that none of their much posher and longer-established competitors in the field have ever dared to attempt: he has put on Wagner's *Ring Cycle* in a converted chicken barn and done so, most impressively, to universal critical acclaim. To stage the *Ring* is an enterprise on such an enormous scale, demanding such huge artistic and financial commitment, that it daunts even the world's greatest metropolitan opera houses. But the only theatre in the British Isles to have staged the cycle in 2013, the bicentenary of Wagner's birth, was the little one in the garden of Mr Martin's manor house at Longborough near Stow-on-the-Wold in Gloucestershire.

Mr Martin is now a dapper, bow-tied, charming man in his early seventies who, when people first learnt of his plan to stage the *Ring*, was generally assumed to be mad. 'I'm beginning to think that the Grahams may have fallen off the edge of a Wagnerian precipice of insanity,' wrote Tom Service of the *Guardian* five years ago. 'The whole project is blissfully barmy,' wrote Richard Morrison in the *Times*. But Mr Martin wouldn't agree. He is a quintessential self-made entrepreneur, who believes that anyone can do anything if they want to. He likes to quote Rainer Maria Rilke, the Austrian poet, who wrote in his *Letters to a Young Poet*: 'That something is difficult must be one more reason for us to do it.'

When I met Martin and Lizzie Graham for tea in London's Brown's Hotel, he kept reiterating his view that if you want something enough, it happens. 'Those who say "it can't be done" are betraying a lack of confidence and willpower,' he said; and then, 'If you want



Martin and Lizzie Graham

something enough, it happens.' Would that that were always true. But how did it happen in Mr Graham's case? Unlike John Christie, the millionaire Old Etonian landowner who founded the Glyndebourne Opera Festival, he started with few advantages in life. His father was a civil servant from Yorkshire who moved to Longborough when Martin was seven. Martin went to grammar school but not to university. Instead he started work as a labourer for a Gloucestershire builder. He believed from an early age that the key to success was to acquire property. He bought an orchard. He built his own little house in Longborough. And then, after forging ahead to become one of the biggest property developers in the Midlands, built the substantial manor house nearby in which he and his wife now live.

But why risk squandering everything on an opera festival? One thing that

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all country house opera entrepreneurs have had in common is a passion for music. This was true of the founders of Glyndebourne, Garsington and Grange Park – Britain's three main summer opera festivals. But Martin Graham developed this passion in an unusual way, from a

modest man in the village of Longborough who became his mentor. This man, said Mr Graham, was an autodidact, who had taught himself to paint, to compose music, and so on, and who had made the boy Martin listen to Schubert and Beethoven on his old-fashioned gramophone. Before long, Martin was hooked and travelling on his own to concerts and operas.

There were sown the seeds of his strange ambition to turn a chicken barn into an opera house and make it Britain's Bayreuth. Without an 'old boy network' to smooth his path, he just wrote out of the blue to Sir Georg Solti, the conductor, and to Sir George Christie of Glyndebourne, John Christie's son and successor, to tell them of his grandiose plans. Solti replied that he must be mad; Christie, however, that he would help. But perhaps none of this mattered very much, for Mr Graham not only believes that if you want something enough, it's bound to happen; he says he found that 'When you say you'll do the *Ring*, everyone just pours in to help. You don't have to do anything.' The most important person to 'pour in' was the Wagnerian Anthony Negus, who conducted the triumphant *Ring* of 2013 and is this year conducting Longborough's first production of *Tristan und Isolde* in four performances between 12th and 20th June.

So, having not done anything (apart, I suppose, from making a barn into an opera house, giving it a neo-classical façade, digging out an orchestra pit, buying up discarded audience seats from Covent Garden, scrabbling for funds, hiring everybody and generally organising everything down to the lavatories with the constant support of his former schoolteacher wife Lizzie), he may possibly have fulfilled his dream. If so, he will have done so without any government subsidy and in a spirit that Margaret Thatcher would have considered exemplary. It's a pity she's not still around to give him a knighthood. 🍷

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