

Scoring: John Socman – 1949 – 1951

George knew immediately that if he was to complete a full-scale opera for the national stage within two years, he must have peace and quiet, with no distractions. George's need for seclusion was paramount, due to mental and social difficulties caused by his PTSD symptoms. Even when he was well and writing *The Serf*, back in 1938, he and Nancy, newly married and with world at his feet, had moved to Tuscany, where they could live cheaply, and quietly, far away and undisturbed by the turbulent waters of the London music scene. In order to write his Fifth Symphony, they had moved to the sleepy village of Corcelletes, where he could concentrate on his work without disturbance. He knew that he could not stay at Priory Road, so they decided to move to the country, but to stay within reach of London. Where all the planning for the Festival of Britain was taking place. They looked first in Dorset, which was both close enough for occasional commuting and sufficiently far away to be undisturbed, and where housing was inexpensive. George took the train from London to Sherborne where he enquired with estate agents for a suitable place, while Nancy took the train to Wimborne to make enquiries in that area. George found The Old Keeper's Cottage, later to become Ryewater Gardens, a small property with 10 acres of land, on the boundary between the parishes of Folke and Holnest, 5 miles south of Sherborne.



The Old Keepers Cottage, Ryewater

Although the horticultural land at Ryewater was later to play a significant part in George's life and his rehabilitation, they had no intention of making a living as gardeners at this stage. George knew that his God/Hero, Giuseppe Verdi, had retired to the country and run a farm, so that parallel may have been a factor, but as far as can be deduced from the archive, the main attraction of the land at Ryewater was the

fact that they could afford it, the location not far from the main line to London and to Cornwall, where Will the librettist, lived), and the seclusion it offered. They borrowed from the bank against the Arts Council commission fee, and with help from Will and Puss, who were selling the house at 69 Priory Road, they had the funds. They did not hesitate. They bought The Old Keeper's Cottage and 10 acres at Ryewater for £500.00, and within two months of the opera commission they had moved to Dorset, taking just a few suitcases, and George had begun work on the new opera, which was to be called *John Socman*.

Will Lloyd already had an outline for the libretto, which he had been working on since 1947 when George returned to England. In that year he had wound up the New English Opera Company which had been established to produce *The Serf*, but the company had no assets and no plans. Although Will and George intended to produce another opera at some time, and Will had half a dozen well-developed outlines for libretti, they would have to rely on the Carl Rosa Company to produce it, assuming that funds could be secured. The Arts Council commission for *John Socman* was like a starting gun – they were all ready to go. Before long Will was back in the action, ducking and diving around the West End in London, planning, negotiating, and in frequent communication with the Arts Council, and with Mrs Phillips who ran the Carl Rosa Company. They planned the resources needed, and talked with the singers, musicians, designers, costumiers, publicists, and venue managers, and of course accountants, before presenting a budget to the Arts Council. They secured a grant of £5000, or about £300,000 at today's values. (2019)

Encouraged by the commission for *John Socman*, in February 1949 wrote to Sir Steuart Wilson, Head of Music at the BBC, submitting scores of his 3rd and 4th Symphony, and asking for a meeting. In July he had a reply from H Vowles, Senior Administrative Assistant, rejecting the work on the grounds that it 'would not convince the reader of its symphonic quality' and that the 3rd had an even less good commendation. George was unable to understand why their opinion had changed so drastically in the two years since it had been previously accepted, and so began a long and fruitless correspondence with the BBC in which he asked for the specific reasons for the refusal to play the symphonies. The matter was not resolved until 1964, when Frank Gillard delivered a damning indictment of the symphonies, and George gave up the struggle. A blow-by-blow account of the correspondence is set out in a separate section.

Having spent his own Arts Council commission fee of £300 for *John Socman* on buying The Old Keeper's Cottage, George and Nancy would have depend on his Royal Navy disability pension to sustain them while writing the opera, with a trickle of royalties from occasional performances, and a small allowance from his father, but it would have to be enough. They had done it before in Italy when writing *The Serf*, and they could do it again. George began work on *John Socman* in April 1949, and delivered the score in April 1951, working six days a week for two years to deliver the opera on time. His was the only one of the three Festival of Britain commissions to be meet the contracted deadline, a fact of which George was immensely proud, since it was not only his music that was on show, but his professionalism and his capacity for work. He needed to show the world that he was back, firing on all cylinders, and although he described it as an immense strain, he delivered.

He immediately re-started his single-minded and rigid regime of work and correspondence, excluding anything and everything not related to the composition in hand. Everything that is, apart from a new regime of treatment for his PTSD symptoms. Nancy developed a daily routine, almost ritualistic in its intensity, involving various forms of healing *mantra*, a controlled diet, alternative medication including homeopathy, Bach Flower remedies, the mysterious 'Touraine Witnesses' and plenty of exercise. George was back in business. He was damaged but making headway. He had a secure and secluded base, just about enough money to live on, the music was flowing out of his pen, and his father, although in poor health, was watching his back, liaising with the opera company, and writing his libretto. Game on.

George and Will both had complete faith that *John Socman* would re-establish his reputation as a composer, but despite all the positive signs, the unequivocal endorsement, and the serious financial support, it turned out to be a forlorn hope, much easier said than done. Their optimism had been justified – they were both realists, they knew the business, and they were well placed, but they could not have foreseen what was to happen next. The rehearsals were chaotic, fraught with vicious operatic rivalry, intrigue and quarrelling principals. The conductor would not speak to the chorus master, and the producer would not speak to the conductor. George attempted to intervene in the feuding in order to get the show on the road and was barred from rehearsals. The Arts Council took a dim view of the shenanigans, and tried to impose their will on Mrs Phillips, who dug in her heels. Suddenly George and Will were fighting on two fronts to get as far as the opening night. The exchange of letters between Nancy and Puss, George's mother, reveal that they the composer and librettist were both fighting their corner with the warring parties, but neither wanted to tell the other bad news for fear of too much stress – George because of his father's poor health, and Will because he did not want to disturb George's writing. In any case there was little they could do, and the poor emotionally damaged and volatile composer found himself unable to function. He was outsmarted, deceived, scapegoated and betrayed. Will was far away in Cornwall, always a day behind, and his letters reveal an increasing desperation and despair. By the opening night he was ill – a broken man.

The premiere was a disaster. From George's point of view, the production was catastrophic, but that is another story - and a long one. The *John Socman* files in the George Lloyd archive are piled about two feet high, and a whole book will be needed to unravel the labyrinthine story.

The chicanery of the production of *John Socman* was severe, and damaging, but that was not the end of it. George's second great trial was just beginning. Within a few weeks of the debacle, George's father, Will, his closest friend, collaborator and ally, had died of heart failure and pneumonia, brought on by the stress of producing *John Socman*. The warring principals, the chaotic rehearsals, the financial mismanagement at the Carl Rosa Company, the infighting between the Carl Rosa and the Arts Council, and the chaotic premiere of the opera were too much for him to bear. He died quietly in his sleep.