



Cardiff

THERE'S MORE TO THE WELSH CAPITAL THAN A SINGING COMPETITION AND A CASTLE. WRITES ALBERT EHRNROOTH

“Praise the Lord! We are a musical nation”, the reverend Eli Jenkins sermonizes in Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood*. In a recent BBC TV adaptation of the radio drama the role of the poetical clergyman was played by the baritone Bryn Terfel. The cast was heavy on Welsh singers of renown: Charlotte Church, Katherine Jenkins and the unstoppable Tom Jones also featured in the play.

Dylan Thomas’s poetry at times presents a Welshness that is rather quaint but the innate musicality of the language provides the best evidence for the theory that the Welsh have singing in their blood.

“Wales to this day continues to produce far more internationally known singers than any other collection of three million people. The Welsh have a powerful musical tradition”, the artistic director of the Welsh National Opera David Pountney tells me when I meet him before the premiere of Arnold Schönberg’s rarely performed *Moses und Aron*.

Everybody knows about the fabulous Welsh male choirs and you may even have seen the world class Cory Brass Band (that visited Australia last year). I think Welsh National Opera (WNO) deserves to get more international attention, if nothing else for their very brave choice of repertoire and almost annually a world premiere (take note Opera Australia)! The WNO tours most productions to several cities, but their base is the Millenium Centre in Cardiff Bay. The

small Hoddinott Hall in the Centre is the second home of the terrific BBC National Orchestra and Chorus of Wales.

I wasn’t very familiar with Cardiff (Caerdydd) apart from its musical offering. When I passed through on my way to concerts I got the impression that it was a city not big on charm. But on closer inspection it turns out that Cardiff has more to offer.

Cardiff only became the capital of Wales in 1955. The castle that gave the city its name is easily the main attraction and its history is as colourful as its eclectic blend of architectural styles. What we see today is an eccentric Victorian interpretation of a Roman and a Norman fort with some neo-Gothic elements thrown in for good measure. The shoppers that stroll past the castle are not in the least intimidated by the imposing 13th-century entrance gate or the three-metre thick walls. The reason being that today’s edifice is more reminiscent of Camelot than a citadel inhabited by fearsome knights. The Romans built the first fort around 60 AD and some of the original stones are embedded in the castle’s front wall. The local tribes showed no interest in Caer Taf (Castle on the River Taff) when the Romans retreated to the Continent in the fourth century. After the Norman conquest, however, the new townfolk recycled old materials to build inner and outer wards and added one of their typical wooden motte and bailey fortifications. A modest town grew



**TRAVEL INFO****Average Temperatures:**

Summer: 13° – 21° Winter: 2° – 8°

Currency: Pound Sterling (AUS\$1 = £0.55)

Best time to visit: All year, however most music festivals are in summer

TOURIST INFORMATION

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in the shadows of the fortress but when the Normans left, the Welsh ransacked the place. Nothing much happened after that, apart from a tsunami that came up the Bristol Channel and hit the little there was of Cardiff in 1607. The castle crumbled and fell into disrepair until the Scottish Bute family became involved through marriage in 1766. A generation later the foundations for modern-day Cardiff were laid under the guidance of the industrious second Marquess of Bute. He was starting to reap the benefits of the coalfields on his Welsh properties and invested heavily in the construction of the Cardiff docks, thereby transforming the town into a booming commodities port in late-Victorian Britain.

I take a guided tour through Lord Bute's apartments, starting in the extravagant Clock Tower where in the Winter Smoking Room medievalism is let loose on themes like the zodiac signs, love conquers all and the Norse gods. It makes you wonder what they were putting in their pipes. There are quite a few murals heavy on religious symbolism but the playfulness with which scenes from fairy tales are depicted on the walls of the children's nursery is delightful.

The Banqueting Hall contains a Minstrels' Gallery and a chimneypiece that doubles as a history lesson on medieval royalty.

Just after the Second World War the coal industry was nationalised and the Butes decided to bequeath the castle and the park to the city. It then became the home of the Welsh College of Music and Drama for the next quarter of a century.

From the top of the Norman tower you get a good view of the city centre and it becomes obvious just how massive the

Millenium Stadium is. It is the Welsh home of rugby and the crowd's singing resonates throughout the city centre on match days.

The Civic Centre, nicknamed the 'Welsh Washington', occupies a large area adjacent to the castle. There is a swaggering elegance about the whole block housing the town hall, law courts, the university and the national museum. City Hall oozes an air of 'nouveau' wealth and never was Edwardian Baroque more stylish. You will need at least two hours to explore the National Museum of Art next door. The Welshman Thomas Jones's intimate oil sketches from the 1780s, made on-the-spot during his Italian sojourn, are worth the visit alone. The 18th-century organ in the centre of the Historic Art Gallery is still in active use and concerts are held in the museum on a monthly basis.

St David's Hall is the major classical concert venue in the city centre and the orchestra-in-residence is the BBC National Orchestra and Chorus of Wales. Opera Australia's former music director Richard Hickox was the orchestra's first Conductor Emeritus and he was working on a recording with them when he suddenly died in 2008.

St David's Hall also hosts the prestigious

biennial BBC Singer of the World competition which has launched the careers of an unusually high number of singers: Karita Mattila, Bryn Terfel, Dmitri Hvorostovsky and Lisa Gasteen, to mention but a few.

Wales's national opera house is the Millenium Centre and I don't think it is half as ugly as it was made out to be when it opened in 2004 (see box). The major inconvenience is that the venue is more than a mile from the city centre in the windswept former docklands.

The science and discovery centre Techniquest and the Doctor Who Experience clearly draw many young visitors. Anyone who has seen just a couple of *Doctor Who* episodes will still be able to recognise some of the film locations in and around Cardiff. The BBC *Doctor Who* studios are located next to the Experience.

You could be forgiven for not spotting

“SINGING RESONATES THROUGHOUT THE CITY CENTRE ON MATCH DAYS”

the Senedd, the Welsh Assembly building, which appears to be half hidden behind the Millenium Centre. It sits on a mountain of slate and star architect Richard Rogers has gone for a transparent and approachable look, with sheets of glass and surprisingly thin rods holding up the undulating wooden roof.

The Senedd building provides evidence of Cardiff's willingness to take a risk, and in the neighbouring Millenium Centre the revitalized WNO has recently shown that by taking a punt you stand a greater chance to progress. ●

Welsh National Opera (but not opera in Welsh)

Formed in 1943, Welsh National Opera (WNO) only became a fully professional company with its own chorus and orchestra in the early 1970s. It built up a reputation for engaging groundbreaking international directors and staging exciting productions of lesser-known operas. Only in 2004 did WNO establish a permanent base in the Millenium Centre with rehearsal rooms, orchestral facilities and a marvellous, large auditorium (1900 seats). WNO is also a very active touring company and both the orchestra and the highly regarded chorus perform independently, mainly at St David's Hall in Cardiff. Chief executive David Pountney is not afraid to take artistic risks and says he was "hired (in 2011) to give more ambition back to the company. You can't feed off the past if you don't nourish the future. That is why I am interested in doing new pieces."

