

Every singer's nightmare

Benjamin Luxon is determined to overcome the deafness that once threatened to bring his glittering operatic career to a premature end. He talked to **Michael Church**

You are giving a recital of Schubert songs, accompanied by a distinguished pianist, to an audience of cognoscenti. During the warm-up, you are suddenly aware of something strange: you can't sing in tune and you can't match your pitch to that of the piano. You try standing in different places, but it makes no difference. So you warn the audience that you may have a problem, that something untoward is happening inside your head.

You launch into *Die Schöne Müllerin*, a work you have many times sung to acclaim. It feels all right, but you can't help noticing that the audience look embarrassed. When the accompanist begins the fourth song, you realise that you have no idea what key it is in. The piano sounds like a hurdy-gurdy. With profuse apologies, you end the recital and send the audience home.

Not bad, as bad dreams go: a paranoid fantasy in the style of Kafka. But this is a true story. Three years ago, when Benjamin Luxon was giving a concert in Blackheath, this happened to him. And worse was to come. "Two days later," he says, "I was deaf. My left ear had quietly, completely, gone."

This ear, moreover, had been his anchor: the other had become afflicted by similar distortions, stopping short of total deafness, the year before. "Now it was like being thrown into Bedlam. The distortion was so bad, I couldn't tell whether singers were male or female. And I couldn't recognise any piece of music at all — not even 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' or 'God Save the Queen'. Yet at the same time, my head was full of terribly trashy tunes. That was my lowest ebb."

Luxon tells this tale with his usual noisy cheerfulness, but there was no mistaking that pit of despair. He was put on chemotherapy and heavy doses of steroids, till he was like a man with a permanent fever. After three decades as an operatic per-

former in constant demand, he seemed to have reached the end of the road.

But though he had kept them secret, his auditory problems dated from 15 years earlier, when he was doing *Otello* in several capitals in quick succession. "My left ear began to switch on and off, and my voice started to boom in my head, as though the sound couldn't get out. Things sounded as if someone had put a tiny transistor in my ear, and came through with a time-lag."

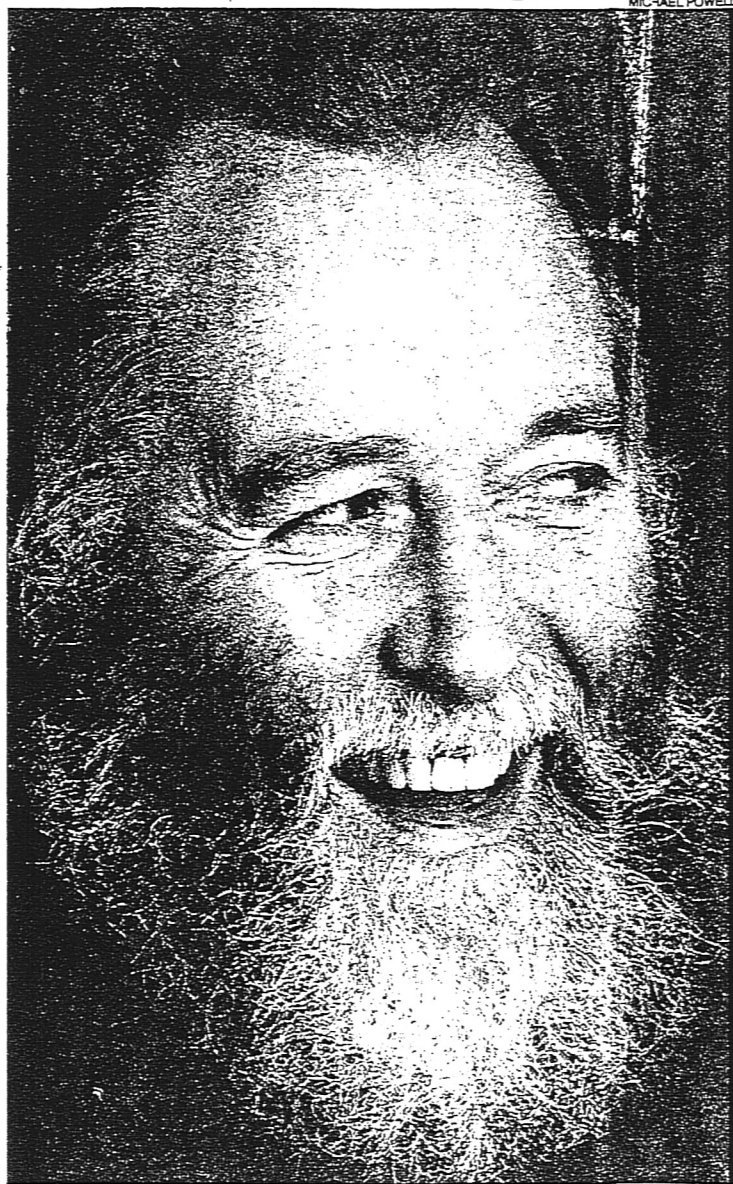
Menière's disease — caused by excessive fluid in the inner ear — was diagnosed, and Luxon was put on a drug. The ear seemed to settle, but he was left with severe tinnitus, a roaring in the ears which he has stoically endured day and night ever since.

After the Blackheath disaster, he was re-diagnosed, but this time as suffering not from Menière's but from a disease so rare as not to have a name. It is an autoimmune problem, he explains, in which a lymph cell turns maverick and attacks the nervous system, notably the eyes and ears. Chemotherapy can suppress it.

Fighter that he is, even Luxon was tempted to give up in such debilitating circumstances, but over the past two years he has painfully forced his way back into the game. On different days he heard the same note at different pitches, but somehow he managed to "feel" the right tonality.

His return to the role of *Falstaff* with the English National Opera next month will mark the climax to a heroic battle against both inner and outer foes: damaged ears and an inevitable loss of nerve; but also rumours that he is finished.

Last month, to his agent's dismay, he spoke about his medical problems on Radio 4. He then decided he wanted to do a press interview — though his elusiveness, once he had agreed to talk to me, spoke volumes about the anxiety involved. So why put



MICHAEL POWELL

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himself through this additional trial?

"Because it's an absolutely necessary step. There's been so much speculation, and I want things to be out in the open, to say exactly what has happened to me, what is happening to me, and what I feel about it. Then people can decide if they want to go on hearing me." He adds immediately that as far as the conductor Seiji Ozawa is concerned, he is still the ideal

Falstaff, and that, in the view of many colleagues, last year in Tokyo he gave his best-ever performance in that role.

What is happening to him now, and what he feels about it, is rather astonishing. The fluctuating distortions have stabilised, and he has a hearing aid programmed to cut out the bass and pump in the high-frequency sound he would otherwise miss.

"This has transformed my life. There have been incredi-

ble breakthroughs with these machines over the last five years, and they can now give hearing to people with almost any kind of loss." Designed for those with one deaf ear, his receiver which gives him the whole hearing spectrum on his deaf side, and allows him to hear in stereo.

"My hearing is so long gone, I can't tell you now what I'm missing," he says. "I don't hear things in an acoustic. I hear the bald tone, but

not the ambience. I have no sense of projection, no idea how it sounds 100 feet away. I have to go by how it feels inside my head."

He pays tribute to his surgeon and his neurologist in London, but it is in Paris, under the tutelage of the neurologist Dr Alfred Tomatis, that a miracle has occurred. Tomatis has created a form of therapy for hearing problems involving exposure to high-frequency sound. Luxon says his high-frequency hearing, which had slipped off the chart, is now, after re-charging by Tomatis, climbing back on to it.

Even more extraordinary, Tomatis — who numbers among his past patients such singers as Gigli and Gobbi — has re-taught Luxon to sing. "He analysed my voice, and said I was damaging my hearing further by continuing to sing in the way I was. To get me to produce the sound differently, he prescribed a humming exercise which is beneficial to the whole system."

Whereupon Luxon illustrates the point with a powerful hum which fills the room like a Buddhist chant, and he opens and closes his mouth to show that this fluctuation has no effect on the sound. "It's in the bone. The body makes its own sound, which you then release through the vocal cords." British neurologists who regard Tomatis as a quack, says Luxon, should take off their blinkers.

What musical qualities has he lost, as a result of his long torment? "When I was young I sang with incredible confidence. My confidence has taken a massive battering, and I get scared now, where I was never scared before."

Then comes a remarkable assertion. "But I now have a much stronger technique. It's ironic but, at 56, I actually think I am approaching a time when I can sing better than I ever did before."

When his disability was at its worst he did not take advance bookings, because he could not guarantee his long-term ability to perform. "Of course, nothing in life is certain. I'm living on a time-bomb, and I may yet have to stop this life and start another as a straight actor. But I don't want to relinquish this one yet. I'm booking ahead again."

● *Falstaff opens at the Coliseum on February 17*

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