

K I N G            A R T H U R

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"KING ARTHUR, or the British Worthy - an Opera", is no opera in our modern sense. It is a would-be heroic melodrama mainly in blank verse, containing a pageant, a good dash of masquery, and a number of what Crummles would have called 'transformations', the whole liberally interspersed with songs and incidental music. Dryden, who wrote the words, is certainly one of the great figures of English Literature, but this is not his best work. It is an amazing farrago of Arthurian Legend, Pagan gods, Classical myths, and post-Miltonic spirits presented with a crudity of stage machinery and direction (e.g. "They fight with Spunges in their hands, dipt in blood: after some equal passes and closing they appear both wounded") that would move a modern audience to laughter. But it was a great success in its day (1691) and, though the authentic Dryden shows itself in the verses of some of the songs and choruses, that success was mainly due to Purcell's music. This was far ahead of its age and, though simple to modern ears, its melodic charm is for all time. Oddly enough, though Dryden published the words, the music was never published in its entirety, and some of the songs and incidental pieces have been lost. The concert version given tonight contains nearly all those that survive, virtually as Purcell wrote them - for he used only one or two wind instruments, in only one or two places, preferring to rely mainly on strings and that early form of piano, the harpsichord.

The first act shows the Britons under Arthur preparing for what is to be the final victory over invading Saxons; the scene changes to "a Place of Heathen Worship" wherein the solos are sung by Priests and a Priestess of Norse Gods, and there are six Saxons who have volunteered to be sacrificed to bring victory, whom the rest address in chorus as "Brave souls, to be renowned in story". After their immolation a battle takes place (off) "with Drums, Trumpets and Military Shouts and Excursions", till the Britons appear singing their song of victory ("Come, if you dare").

Act II, Scene I shows the good spirit Philidel (soprano) lamenting over the battlefield, attended by the spirits of Arthur's magician, Merlin (chorus sopranos and altos); an "earthly spirit" (bass) and other evil sprites in the Saxon service (chorus tenors and basses) are trying to lead Arthur into bogs. Each group exhorts him "Hither this way bend", till the good spirits, singing "Come follow me - we brethren of air you heroes will bear", carry him off to safety. In Scene II, Arthur's lady, Emmeline, waiting his return, is beguiled by Shepherds and Shepherdesses who dance and sing choruses, solos and duets (at one point we are directed, "Here the Women give the Men Contracts, which they accept"). By Act III, Emmeline has been carried off by the Saxons' magician, who tries to win her heart by showing the power of love thus:- He "strikes the ground with his wand, the scene changes to a winter prospect", and Cupid (soprano) appears, calls up the Cold Genius (bass) and his frozen spirits, and thaws them ("Tis Love that has warmed us"). The curious shivering solo and chorus are probably unique.

Act IV shows Arthur, guided by Philidel, coming to rescue his lady from a magic wood, and we hear the music of Sirens and others ("How happy the Lover - no joy is above the pleasures of love") who try in vain to lead him aside to illicit amours. In Act V, Arthur has recovered his fair lady, declares that Britons and Saxons shall henceforth be one people, and when our music starts Merlin has conjured up "the British Ocean in a storm, Aeolus in a cloud above: Four Winds hanging". Aeolus (bass) quiets the winds so that Venus (soprano) may hymn the praise of Britain in what has become the best known air of the Opera. And, after a "Grand Dance", Comus closes our music by leading the British peasantry in the old folk song, "Harvest Home". The spoken part of the opera then concludes with a pageant of the Order of the Garter. "And so", as a famous contemporary would have put it, "to bed", with the story forgotten but with the music still ringing in our ears.