



King Arthur

Henry Purcell

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The Purcells are a difficult family to research. They are only ever called Henry or Thomas (or Elizabeth), they never write letters, and they have their children christened by absent-minded clergymen who lose the baptismal registers. The result is that we know hardly anything about the early life of Henry Purcell, the composer of *The Fairy Queen*. He seems to have been born about 1659 to either a Henry or a Thomas Purcell, was brought up in some rough streets round Westminster Abbey and became a choirboy in the Chapel Royal in about 1667. He composed and arranged music all through his teens and was eventually appointed Keeper of the King's Instruments. The rest of his life was spent writing and playing for the King's musicians at Court and in the great royal churches of Westminster Abbey and the Chapel Royal.

Restoration Composer

It sounds very respectable, but there was another side to Purcell. He grew up in the Restoration, the period when Englishmen threw off the miseries of Puritan life, welcomed Charles II back to London, and settled down to enjoy themselves. New fashions swept the town: fancy bows, heavy lace, huge wigs (and that was just the men), new-fangled coffee-houses sprung up all over the city and the theatres reopened. Purcell and his colleagues spent as much time in the Westminster taverns and coffee-houses as in the Abbey itself, and they all worked for the theatre.

Trouble at the Theatre

It was a difficult time to be a theatre musician. Over the Channel, opera was sweeping the continent and, given that Purcell was England's greatest composer, you might have thought he would have been begged to write operas. But he wasn't. London's theatres were locked in a quarrel that had been going on for 30 years, and it wanted nothing to do with the new art form. Under Cromwell all the theatres had been shut and the actors thrown out of work and, when the theatres reopened, they were in no mood to share the stage with singers and musicians. However, by the 1690s, there was such a demand for musical shows that the theatres compromised by putting on semi-operas. These were plays (performed by actors) interrupted by musical interludes (performed by singers): it wasn't a good format and didn't survive.

King Arthur is a semi-opera. It is set to a play by John Dryden and all the main characters are actors. The singers play a periphery role in the drama and are mostly supernatural beings or peasants. (This is because English audiences were embarrassed by opera: they didn't think it likely that ordinary people would burst into song, but of course elves, spirits and peasants were another matter...) The story has nothing to do with any King Arthur story you've ever heard: there is no Round Table, no sword in the stone, no

Lancelot – and definitely no Guinivere. Dryden made it up, though he set it back in the 5th C AD when the real Arthur seems to have been alive¹.

King Arthur at the Coliseum

The story of *King Arthur* is told in the spoken dialogue and the main characters (King Arthur, the blind heroine Emmeline, and the wicked Saxon, Oswald) don't sing at all. The London Coliseum is a music theatre, with a wide auditorium that isn't good for the spoken voice, so English National Opera has decided to ditch the play and concentrate on the music. The opera will be put on by ENO singers and the Mark Morris Dance company. How Mark Morris will set the piece we don't yet know but, as he always takes the story seriously, it seems sensible to go through the plot.

The Play is set during the time of the Saxon invasions. King Arthur has fought ten battles and freed most of his country – except Kent, which is held by the Saxon King Oswald. Oswald is Arthur's rival for the hand of Emmeline (the blind daughter of the Duke of Cornwall). So far this all sounds like straight history, but 5th century Britain turns out to be a stranger place than you might think. It is not only full of warring Britons and Saxons, but overrun with magicians, spirits and fairies. Most of them very large and dangerous.

Oswald has the help of a magician, Osmond, who can summon up two spirits, Grimbald and Philidel (both singing parts), while Arthur relies on his friend, the wizard, Merlin. In Act II Merlin persuades Philidel to go over to the Britons, and the spirit saves the British army from wandering into a bog: he also manages to restore Emmeline's sight. In Act III King Oswald and Osmond both fall in love with Emmeline and quarrel. Osmond manages to lock King Oswald up and tries to entertain the princess with a Masque², in which he shows the power of love thawing a whole frozen landscape. She is deeply unimpressed and the magician turns his attention to Arthur. In Act IV he sends two beautiful women to seduce the British king and unleashes Grimbald on him, disguised as Emmeline. Again he's totally unsuccessful, Arthur sees through all his tricks, and captures Grimbald. By Act V Osmond has given up, he lets Oswald out of prison and the two kings fight a duel. Arthur wins, regains Emmeline and lets Oswald go free. There is a huge storm, Britannia [note?] rises from the sea and the work ends in a series of patriotic choruses in praise of British wool, fish and our phenomenal abilities as lovers.

The Music

Unlike most operas the characters in *King Arthur* are called things like 'a soprano', 'a tenor' and so on. Some named parts stand out, **Grimbald** (baritone), **Philidel** (soprano), the **Frost King** (bass), **Cupid** (soprano) and various choruses of Shepherds, Spirits and Frozen People.

The first musical scene shows the Saxons offering various animals in sacrifice, as they get ready to fight the British. It sounds rather like a church

¹ He is always thought to have been a British king who led his people against the invading Norsemen.

² A Masque was a musical interlude in a play. It normally consisted of singers and dancers and represented a mythological scene.

service until a tenor sings a jaunty little song about the delights of Valhalla³ and the Saxon soldiers line up for battle. The Brits jeer at them in the taunting chorus, "Come if you dare!" and the Saxons rush off to the 'the double, double, double beat of the thundering drum'.

They are soundly beaten (offstage) and the next musical scene shows the Britons pursuing them. (You never see both armies together on stage for the very good reason that they're played by the same men.) Grimbald tries to misdirect Arthur and his men into bogs and rivers, while Philidel does his best to get them on to safer ground. Confusingly, for the soldiers, both sets of spirits sing, "Hither, this way..." from different parts of the stage and it's almost impossible to work out which bunch of fairies to believe. Fortunately the Britons work it out and exit safely.

A little later Emmeline is entertained by Oswald with a group of Kentish peasants. The men tell her that shepherds are untroubled by war, as they spend most of their time chasing girls. The girls are less enchanted with the delights of love, and tell Emmeline they make sure the shepherds marry them first.

There is no more music until Act III, when Osmond puts on his Frozen Masque for Emmeline. This is probably the most famous scene in *King Arthur*. We hear Cupid, the god of Love, calling up the Frost King who appears, very grumpy and shivering with cold. (The strings in the orchestra are shivering too...) However he cheers up the moment he realises it is Love himself who has woken him, "Great Love, I know thee now: eldest of the gods art thou..." he says, and kneels. All his people come on, shivering with cold, but they too hail Cupid, stop shaking, and begin to dance. Emmeline yawns.

In the fourth act two Sirens try to tempt Arthur, and a tenor sings an extended aria about the delights of love. Arthur remains unmoved.

The last act is a mixture of song, dance and spectacle. It starts with a tempest (described by a bass, with trumpet accompaniment) which transforms into a calm sea and a vision of Britannia, rising from the waves, with fishermen at her feet. The chorus praise the delicious meat and fish of the British Isles, while Comus (baritone) and his mates come on under the influence of British beer. They sing a rollicking song about the harvest before lurching off to make way for one of Purcell's most serene arias, 'Fairest Isle, all isles excelling'. This soprano solo, followed by a love duet, finishes the piece.

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³ The Saxon heaven.