

Tafelmusik

Purcell *King Arthur* PROGRAMME NOTES

John Dryden first wrote the play *King Arthur* in 1684, probably in anticipation of the celebrations of the silver jubilee of King Charles II, whom he served as Poet Laureate. The play had a sung prologue, an allegory of the restoration of the Stuart monarchy. This first version was never performed: the King preferred a French-style opera, so Dryden expanded the prologue into a full-length opera, *Albion & Albanus*, with music by the Spanish composer Luis Grabu. Six years later, with William and Mary on the throne and Dryden reliant on public rather than royal support, he returned to *King Arthur*, with plans to present it in the London theatres in the summer of 1691.

He described the original work as “a Play, of the Nature of the Tempest; which is, a Tragedy mix’d with Opera; or a Drama Written in blank Verse, adorn’d with Scenes, Machines, Songs and Dances: so that the Fable of it is all spoken and acted by the best of the Comedians; the other part of the Entertainment to be perform’d by Singers and Dancers.” He went on to say that it “cannot properly be call’d a Play, because the action of it is suppos’d to be conducted sometimes by supernatural means, or Magick; nor an Opera because the Story of it is not sung.”

In revising *King Arthur*, Dryden made extensive changes. Some of the changes were politically motivated: “not to offend the present Times, nor Government which has hitherto protected me, I have been oblig’d to alter the first Design, and take away so many Beauties from the Writing.” Other changes were required by his new collaborator, Henry Purcell: “the Numbers of Poetry and Vocal Musick, are sometimes so contrary, that in many places I have been oblig’d to cramp my Verses and make them rugged to the Reader, that they may be harmonious to the Hearer.” The result was a work that was as much Purcell’s as it was Dryden’s, with the writer conceding that, “because these sorts of Entertainments are principally design’d for the Ear and Eye, my Art, on this occasion, ought to be subservient to his.”

If Dryden was hesitant to call his original script either an opera or a play, he now confidently labelled it “A Dramatick Opera,” a play in which the music was integral to the plot and not merely incidental. The main characters participate in the musical scenes, but as actors, not as singers. Two characters, the rival spirits Philidel and Grimbald, are pivotal in that they both sing and speak. The remainder of the music was performed then as we are doing in our performances this week: with three solo singers accompanied by a choir, from which are drawn some of the smaller roles, and an orchestra.

The original production proved very successful and *King Arthur*, in various guises, has remained in the repertoire of both theatre companies and musical organizations ever since. The first known concert performances of the work date from 1704. In adapting the work for our concert stage this week, we have necessarily omitted the dancers (though not the dances) and the stage effects. We also do not have space or time for a full cast of actors, but were hesitant to completely ignore the “dramatick” portions of the work. We have thus abridged and adapted the spoken text, with apologies to Dryden and the “Rules of Poetry,” so that the essential action of the play can be narrated between the musical portions.

The plot is a largely fictional account of Arthur leading the Britons in battle against Oswald and the Saxons to establish a United Kingdom. Much of the action is given to Arthur's attempts to rescue his beloved Emmeline, the beautiful blind daughter of one of his vassals, from the hands of Oswald and his Saxon magician Osmond. Osmond is matched by Arthur's Merlin, and Osmond's earthy spirit Grimbald by Merlin's airy spirit Philidel. Grimbald and Philidel owe much to Shakespeare's Caliban and Ariel, and in particular to Dryden and Davenant's 1667 reworking of *The Tempest*, as does the overall atmosphere of magic and the supernatural. Metaphors abound: seeing vs. unseeing, light vs. dark, air vs. earth, heaven vs. hell, Christian vs. heathen, innocence vs. evil. Politics, military conquest and patriotism define the plot, but the opera is first and foremost a fairy story for the stage, a tale full of humour, fantasy and spectacle.