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978-1-107-48688-1 - King Arthur or the British Worthy: A

Dramatick Opera

John Dryden

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DRYDEN'S KING ARTHUR

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KING ARTHUR

OR

THE BRITISH WORTHY

A Dramatick Opera

BY

JOHN DRYDEN

*As Performed at the New Theatre
Cambridge*

14–18 February 1928

with

The Alterations Adopted

by

HENRY PURCELL

Cambridge

at the University Press

1928

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ON June the 3rd, 1685, *Albion and Albanus*, an allegorical opera by Dryden and Grabu, was produced. Originally intended to immortalise Charles II and the Duke of York, this work was altered after Charles's death to flatter the new king. Like the allegorical introductions to the foreign operas of the day, *Albion and Albanus* was to be an extended prologue to a great patriotic music drama, but at least two chances helped to damn the prologue and to postpone the writing of the opera proper. News reached London that the Duke of Monmouth had landed in the west, and—as Downes says—“The Nation being in a great consternation, it was performed but Six times, which not Answering half THE Charge they were at, Involv'd the Company very much in debt”. Dryden was besides guilty of a serious error of judgment in choosing for his composer Charles II's French Master of Musick, who was by no means a rival to his fellow-countryman Lulli and who, though possibly a favourite of the king, was not admired by serious English musicians. Dryden's preface

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alludes slightly to English composers and Grabu's dedication insults English singers. Small wonder then that there was no immediate prospect of the patriotic opera seeing the light.

By 1691 however William and Mary were firmly established and Purcell was generally recognised as a master composer. Dryden accordingly rose to the occasion and produced *King Arthur* as a grand patriotic opera in collaboration with the new genius.

To judge from the Epistle Dedicatory the collaboration was genuine. Dryden writes:

I have been oblig'd so much to alter the first Design...that it is now no more what it was formerly, than the present Ship of the *Royal Sovereign*, after so often taking down, and altering, to the Vessel it was at the first Building. There is nothing better, than what I intended, but the Musick; which has since arriv'd to a greater Perfection in *England*, than ever formerly; especially passing through the Artful Hands of Mr. *Purcel*, who has Compos'd it with so great a Genius, that he has nothing to fear but an ignorant, ill-judging Audience. But 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: Of which I have no Reason to repent me, because these sorts of Entertainment are principally design'd for the

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Ear and Eye; and therefore in Reason my Art,
 on this occasion, ought to be subservient to his.
 And besides, I flatter my self with an Imagi-
 nation, that a Judicious Audience will easily
 distinguish betwixt the Songs, wherein I have
 comply'd with him, and those in which I have
 followed the Rules of Poetry, in the Sound and
 Cadence of the Words.

King Arthur was first produced at the Dorset
 Garden Theatre in December 1691 with the
 following cast:

Arthur	...	Betterton
Oswald	...	Williams
Conon	...	Hodgson
Merlin	...	Kynaston
Osmond	...	Sandford
Aurelius	...	Alexander
Albanact	...	Bowen
Guillamar	...	Harris
Emmeline	...	Mrs Bracegirdle
Matilda	...	Mrs Richardson
Philidel	...	Mrs Butler
Grimbald	...	Mr Bowman

It was played several times¹ and seen by
 the Queen and her Maids of Honour on
 January 7, 1691/2².

¹ *Gentleman's Journal*, January 1692.

² Nicoll's *Restoration Drama*. Lord Chamberlain's
 Records 5/151, p. 369.

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The opera was revived in 1736, and in 1770 Garrick produced it with “some slight Alterations . . . for the greater Convenience of Representation” and some new songs by Arne, “where it was thought such Additions would be of Service to the whole”. The cast on this occasion included Mrs Baddeley as Philidel and Vernon, a tenor who had earlier been famous as a male soprano.

It was again revived in 1781 “the first time for six years” with Miss Wright (Michael Arne’s wife?) as the priestess and a siren. In 1784 Kemble played Arthur and still more music was added by Linley.

In the nineteenth century there were four revivals. In 1803 Mrs Siddons appeared as Emmeline, and her husband as Oswald: in 1819 it was staged at Covent Garden: in 1827 it was produced at the English Opera House without Arne’s music but with additions from Purcell’s *Indian Queen* and *Dido and Aeneas*, and, for the last time, under Macready’s direction at Drury Lane in 1842 with twelve additional characters, a new masque, a quantity of interpolated music from Purcell’s other dramatic works, and such a profusion of “sparkling of the waters in the sunlight, and the glittering spray as it descends a rocky eminence” that the audience

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applauded the production rather than the music, and Macready was severely criticised¹.

The present 1928 revival at Cambridge is therefore perhaps the first complete revival since the seventeenth century in the spirit and—as far as possible—in the manner intended by Dryden and Purcell.

II

By the autumn of 1690, though experienced as a composer, Henry Purcell, aged thirty-one², had barely begun to make his name as a writer for the theatre. He had to his credit—apart from a few songs, elegies, catches, the Sonatas in three parts, and the Service in B flat—twenty Odes or Welcome Songs and about fifty anthems. It is true that he had already written music for some sixteen plays, but the music in most of these consists merely of an occasional song or instrumental piece—with the exception of *Dido and Aeneas*, *The Tempest*(?) and *Dioclesian*.

There is nothing to show that the freak masterpiece *Dido and Aeneas* attracted any attention outside the friendly audience at the school where it was produced. But *Dioclesian* was so effective that Dryden allowed Purcell to set the songs in his *Amphitryon* and as a

¹ *Dramatic and Musical Review*, November 19, 1842.

² See *Henry Purcell* (Oxford Press), by the present writer.

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result was moved to write in the prefatory letter

what has been wanting on my Part, has been abundantly supplied by the Excellent Composition of Mr. *Purcell*; in whose Person we have at length found an *English-Man*, equal with the best abroad. At least my Opinion of him has been such, since his happy and judicious Performances in the late *Opera*; and the Experience I have had of him, in the setting my three Songs for this *Amphitryon*. To all of which, and particularly to the Composition of the *Pastoral Dialogue*, the numerous Quire of Fair Ladies gave so just an Applause on the Third Day.

The result was *King Arthur* and the music to thirty-seven other plays in the last five years of Purcell's life.

Unfortunately the original score was soon lost—possibly with the *Fairy Queen* music as early as 1701. Two hundred years later the latter was discovered in the Library of the Royal Academy of Music, but the whereabouts of the original *King Arthur* manuscript is still unknown.

For this revival and for the Purcell Society Edition I have consulted the following MSS.:

A MS. at the Royal Academy of Music (dated 1698/9).

A MS. at Oriel College (late seventeenth or early eighteenth century).

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Four early eighteenth century mss. at Tenbury, the British Museum and the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Seven late eighteenth century mss. at the British Museum, the Royal Music Library, Gresham College, the Royal College of Music and the library of the late W. H. Cummings.

Fourteen fragmentary mss. dating from c. 1704 to c. 1798.

None of these, however, are complete and none accurate¹.

Apart from editions of the whole opera—Taylor's and Macfarren's (1843), Arkwright's (1889), Cummings's (1897), and Fuller Maitland's (1897)—various numbers have been printed from 1696 to the present day, the most popular being "Come, if you dare", "Fairest Isle" and portions of the "Frost Scene": not to mention a Dramatic Fantasia on the latter (1842), "The King Arthur Quadrilles" (1843) and "The Rifleman's March" introducing "Come, if you dare" (1860).

The music was scored for two flutes, two hautboys, two trumpets, drums², strings and *continuo*.

DENNIS ARUNDELL

¹ With regard to the numbers marked in the text as missing, it is quite probable that these were never set by Purcell so as to avoid holding up the action.

² No drum parts have survived, but they were obviously used.

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¶ The text has been taken from the first collected edition of 1701, obvious errors being corrected.

¶ Lines enclosed in square brackets [] were omitted in the 1928 production.

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PROLOGUE TO THE OPERA

Spoken by MR BETTERTON

[*S*ure there's a Dearth of Wit in this dull Town,
 When filly Plays so favourly go down:
 As when Clipp'd Money passes, 'tis a sign
 A Nation is not over-stock'd with Coin.
 Happy is he, who, in his own Defence,
 Can Write just level to your humble Sence;
 Who higher than your Pitch can never go;
 And doubtless, he must creep, who Writes below.
 So have I seen in Hall of Knight, or Lord,
 A weak Arm, throw on a long Shovel-Board,
 He barely lays his Piece, bar Rubs and Knocks,
 Secur'd by weakness not to reach the Box.
 A Feeble Poet will his Bus'ness do;
 Who straining all he can, comes up to you:
 For if you like your Selves, you like him too.
 An Ape his own Dear Image will embrace;
 An ugly Beau adores a Hatchet Face:
 So some of you, on pure instinct of Nature,
 Are led, by Kind, t' admire your fellow Creature.
 In fear of which, our House has sent this Day,
 T' insure our New-Built-Vessel, call'd a Play.
 No sooner Nam'd than one crys out, These Stagers
 Come in good time, to make more Work for Wagers.
 The Town divides, if it will take, or no,
 The Courtiers Bet, the Cits, the Merchants too; }
 A sign they have but little else to do.

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PROLOGUE to the OPERA

*Betts, at the first, were Fool-Traps; where the Wise
 Like Spiders, lay in Ambush for the Flies:
 But now they're grown a common Trade for all,
 And Actions, by the News-Book, Rise and Fall. }
 Wits, Cheats, and Fops, are free of Wager-Hall. }
 One Policy, as far as Lyons carries;
 Another, nearer home sets up for Paris.
 Our Betts, at last, wou'd ev'n to Rome extend,
 But that the Pope has prov'd our Trusty Friend.
 Indeed, it were a Bargain, worth our Money,
 Cou'd we insure another Ottobuoni.
 Among the rest, there are a sharpening Sett,
 That Pray for us, and yet against us Bett:
 Sure Heav'n it self, is at a loss to know,
 If these wou'd have their Pray'rs be heard, or no:
 For in great Stakes, we piously suppose,
 Men Pray but very faintly they may lose.
 Leave off these Wagers; for in Conscience Speaking,
 The City needs not your new Tricks for breaking:
 And if you Gallants lose, to all appearing
 You'll want an Equipage for Volunteering;
 While thus, no Spark of Honour left within ye,
 When you shou'd draw the Sword, you draw the Guinea.】*

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

King *Arthur*.

Ofwald, King of *Kent*, a Saxon and a Heathen.

Conon, Duke of *Cornwal*, Tributary to King
Arthur.

Merlin, a famous *Inchanter*.

Ofmond, a Saxon Magician, and a Heathen.

Aurelius, Friend to *Arthur*.

Albanact, Captain of *Arthur*'s Guards.

Guillamar, Friend to *Ofwald*.

Emmeline, Daughter of *Conon*.

Matilda, her Attendant.

Philidel, an Airy Spirit.

Grimbald, an Earthy Spirit.

Officers and Soldiers, Singers and Dancers, &c.

Scene in *KENT*.