

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 26 September 2024
7.30pm

Vox Luminis

Lionel Meunier artistic director, recorder
Tuomo Suni violin I
Jacek Kurzydło violin II
Johannes Frisch viola
Ronan Kernoa bass violin
Benoit Vanden Bemden violone
Jasu Moisió oboe I, recorder
Gustav Friedrichson oboe II

Armin Köbler oboe III, recorder
Lisa Goldberg bassoon
Rudolf Lörinc trumpet I
Moritz Görg trumpet II
Koen Plaetinck timpani, percussion
Simon Linné lute, theorbo, baroque guitar
Justin Glaie lute, theorbo, baroque guitar
Anthony Romaniuk harpsichord, organ

Simon Robson actor
Viola Blache soprano
Hannah Ely soprano
Carine Tinney soprano
Zsuzsanna Tóth soprano
Helene Erben alto
Jan Kullmann alto
Korneel van Neste alto
Rory Carver tenor
Jacob Lawrence tenor
Kieran White tenor
Marcus Fansworth bass
Sebastian Myrus bass

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

King Arthur Z628 (1691)



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King Arthur is a difficult piece to make sense of today, and would have been for many people even in a 1690s theatre audience.

It began life in the early 1680s, commissioned ('commanded') by King Charles II to celebrate his final triumph over parliamentary opponents. For years these had been trying to prevent Charles's brother and presumptive heir, James Duke of York, from inheriting the throne of Great Britain should Charles die without fathering any legitimate offspring. Since James was an openly practising Roman Catholic he would, from their so-called 'exclusionist' point of view, have been a radically unsuitable head of the Church of England. (Charles avoided conflict by converting to Catholicism only on his deathbed.) Royalists of more flexible religious persuasion saw things differently. Had God not intended James to succeed Charles, then a situation making that outcome increasingly likely would not have been allowed to arise. At stake was the divine right of kings to rule without having to worry about revolutionaries plotting to bring them down.

Charles had reason to worry. His and James's father King Charles I had been deposed and then executed by Parliamentary rebels in the 1640s, in a perversion of divinely-ordained will not corrected until Charles II returned from exile to restore the monarchy in 1660. Post-restoration political opposition, with which his financially extravagant and sexually adventurous lifestyle had much to do, rumbled on until 1681 – when in a bold move (copied by Boris Johnson centuries later) he silenced enemies in parliament by dissolving parliament itself. *King Arthur* was meant to capture the mood of this 'time proper for triumph'. John Dryden, Charles's poet laureate, scripted a five-act play alluding to political events in what would have been an immediately recognisable way in the 1680s, and provided lyrics for a number of musical episodes meant to slot into the play at various points. These were not set to music straight away; nor was *King Arthur* staged in Charles's lifetime. He died unexpectedly in 1685. James did succeed him...but only lasted three years on the throne. His pro-Catholic policies threatened well-entrenched Church of England interests enough to provoke another revolution, this one driving James back into French exile and installing William III and Mary II as joint monarchs in his place. (Mary was James's staunchly Protestant older daughter. The coup had just enough religious legitimacy to win most of the country over.)

Seven years later than intended, then, after lengthy hibernation in Dryden's bottom drawer, *King Arthur* finally reached the stage. Because its original political message did not suit the 'present times', Dryden claimed to have revised the script comprehensively. This may or may not have been true. Readers combing through the script in its 1691 published version could have recovered once-intended allegorical content easily enough, while theatregoers chiefly attracted by Purcell's music could ignore subtexts. Modern performers have to decide how much to make of *King Arthur*'s political aspect – knowing that their 17th Century forebears faced the same choice, and very likely presented *King Arthur* in different ways on

different occasions. No one definitively 'right' interpretation is available. Possible interpretations sit somewhere on a spectrum stretching from detailed, deadly serious political allegory at one extreme, to madcap patriotic romp at the other.

Tonight's performance holds options very skilfully open by framing *King Arthur*'s musical episodes within a modern prose narrative briefly and accurately summarising plot-lines running through the play. Musical episodes so very different in character were not designed to flow continuously, one leading straight into the next. The effect if they were jammed together that way would be far from satisfactory. *King Arthur* as oratorio would fall flat. Yet despite their disparate character – Purcell and his theatrical collaborators aimed for maximum contrast – these musical episodes do support the key themes of Dryden's play in a fairly systematic way:

Act I: Arthur, a divinely-mandated Christian king, leads his loyal Britons to victory over the 'heathen' Saxons. Parliaments were reputedly a Saxon invention, and exclusionist opposition to Charles's succession plans was centred on Parliament. Before heading off for battle the Saxons offer sacrifices to their false gods. These precautions get them nowhere.

Act I: Following British victory fair and square, the Saxons resort to trickery. Malicious spirits hiding in the bushes try to lure Arthur and his followers off their proper path into a bog. Good spirits sing them back to safety.

Act III: Arthur's fiancée Emmeline needs entertaining while Arthur is away. 'Kentish lads and lasses' do the honours. Their approach to life, as to music making – at once light-hearted and down-to-earth (no sex before marriage) – suggests a level of contentment to which peasants in nations less well ruled than Stuart Britain could not aspire. Then Osmond the Saxon magician abducts Emmeline, under orders from Saxon prince Oswald to hold her hostage. Lust gets the better of him. Osmond conjures up the famous Frost Scene in a vain attempt to seduce her.

Act IV: As Arthur rushes to Emmeline's rescue, a now-vengeful Osmond places temptation after temptation in his way. Charles II would have struggled to resist. Will Arthur hold out?

Act V: After the final, decisive duel between Arthur and Oswald, Arthur – victorious of course – offers his Saxon adversary some highly magnanimous terms of truce. Britons and Saxons (royalists, parliamentarians and even republicans) can, if they try, live together in a 'perpetual peace'. This Vision of Britain prefigures every imaginable happy moment in yet-to-happen British history. So although *King Arthur* started out as commentary on the events of a particular reign, its grand finale escapes that constraint. Dryden, and Purcell setting Dryden's words, speak to the future and challenge their descendants to make 17th-century dreams of social inclusivity come true.

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Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

King Arthur Z628 (1691)

John Dryden

Overture

Air

Act I

First Saxon Priest

Woden, first to thee
A milk-white steed, in battle won,
We have sacrific'd.

Chorus

We have sacrific'd.

Second Saxon Priest

Let our next oblation be
To Thor, thy thund'ring son,
Of such another.

Chorus

We have sacrific'd.

First Saxon Priest

A third (of Friesland breed was he)
To Woden's wife, and to Thor's mother;
And now, we have aton'd all three.

Chorus

We have sacrific'd.

Second Priest and Priestess

The white horse neigh'd aloud.
To Woden thanks we render,
To Woden we have vow'd.

Chorus

To Woden, our defender, thanks we render ...

Priestess

The lot is cast, and Tanfan pleas'd;
Of mortal cares you shall be eas'd.

Chorus

Brave souls, to be renown'd in story,
Honour prizing,
Death despising,
Fame acquiring
By expiring,
Die and reap the fruit of glory.

Priestess

I call you all
To Woden's Hall,
Tour temples round

With ivy bound
In goblets crown'd,
And plenteous bowls of burnish'd gold,
Where ye shall laugh
And dance and quaff
The juice that makes the Britons bold.

Chorus

To Woden's Hall all
Where in plenteous bowls of burnish'd gold
We shall laugh
And dance and quaff
The juice that makes the Britons bold.

British Warrior

'Come if you dare', our trumpets sound.
'Come if you dare', the foes rebound.
'We come, we come, we come, we come',
Says the double beat of the thund'ring drum.

Chorus

'Come if you dare', our trumpets sound ...

British Warrior

Now they charge on amain,
Now they rally again.
The Gods from above the mad labour behold,
And pity mankind that will perish for gold.

Chorus

Now they charge on amain ...

British Warrior

The fainting Saxons quit their ground,
Their trumpets languish in their sound,
They fly, they fly, they fly, they fly,
'Victoria', the bold Britons cry.

Chorus

The fainting Saxons quit their ground ...

British Warrior

Now the victory's won,
To the plunder we run,
We return to our lasses like fortunate traders,
Triumphant with spoils of the vainquish'd invaders.

Chorus

Now the victory's won ...

First Act Tune

Please do not turn the page until the song and its accompaniment have ended.

Act II

Philidel

Hither, this way, this way bend,
Trust not the malicious fiend.
Those are false deluding lights
Wafted far and near by sprites.
Trust'em not, for they'll deceive ye,
And in bogs and marshes leave ye.

Chorus of Philidel's Spirits

Hither, this way, this way bend.

Chorus of Grimbald's Spirits

This way, hither, this way bend.

Philidel

If you step no longer thinking,
Down you fall, a furlong sinking.
'Tis a fiend who has annoy'd ye;
Name but Heav'n, and he'll avoid ye.
Hither, this way.

Chorus of Philidel's Spirits

Hither, this way, this way bend.

Chorus of Grimbald's Spirits

This way, hither, this way bend.

Chorus of Philidel's Spirits

Trust not the malicious fiend.
Hither, this way, this way bend.

Grimbald

Let not a moonborn elf mislead ye
From our prey and from your glory;
To fear, alas, he has betray'd ye;
Follow the flames that wave before ye,
Sometimes sev'n and sometimes one.
Hurry, hurry, hurry on.

See, see the footsteps plain appearing.
That way Oswald chose for flying.
Firm is the turf and fit for bearing,
Where yonder pearly dews are lying.
Far he cannot hence be gone.
Hurry, hurry, hurry on.

Chorus of Philidel's Spirits

Hither, this way, this way bend.

Chorus of Grimbald's Spirits

Hither, this way, this way bend.

Chorus of Philidel's Spirits

Trust not the malicious fiend.
Hither, this way, this way bend.

Philidel and Soprano, Tenor, Bass

Come, follow me.

Chorus

Come, follow me ...

Two Voices

And green-sward all your way shall be.

Chorus

Come, follow me ...
No goblin or elf shall dare to offend ye.

Ritornello

Three Voices

We brethren of air
You heroes will bear,
To the kind and the fair that attend ye.

Chorus

We brethren of air ...

Shepherd

How blest are shepherds, how happy their lasses,
While drums and trumpets are sounding alarms!
Over our lowly sheds all the storm passes,
And when we die 'tis in each other's arms,
All the day on our herds and flocks employing,
All the night on our flutes and in enjoying.

Chorus

How blest are shepherds, how happy their lasses ...

Shepherd

Bright nymphs of Britain with graces attended,
Let not your days without pleasure expire.
Honour's but empty, and when youth is ended,
All men will praise you but none will desire.
Let not youth fly away without contenting;
Age will come time enough for your repenting.

Chorus

Bright nymphs of Britain with graces attended ...

Two Shepherdesses

Shepherd, shepherd, leave decoying:
Pipes are sweet on summer's day,
But a little after toying,
Women have the shot to pay.
Here are marriage-vows for signing:
Set their marks that cannot write,
After that, without repining,
Play, and welcome, day and night.

Chorus

Come, Shepherds, lead up a lively measure;
The cares of wedlock are cares of pleasure:
But whether marriage brings joy or sorrow,
Make sure of this day and hang tomorrow.

Hornpipe

Air

Act III

Prelude

Cupid

What ho! thou genius of this isle, what ho!
Liest thou asleep beneath those hills of snow?
Stretch out thy lazy limbs. Awake, awake!
And winter from thy furry mantle shake.

Prelude

Cold Genius

What power art thou, who from below
Hast made me rise unwillingly and slow
From beds of everlasting snow?
See'st thou not how stiff and wondrous old
Far unfit to bear the bitter cold,
I can scarcely move or draw my breath?
Let me, let me freeze again to death.

Cupid

Thou doting fool, forbear, forbear!
What dost thou mean by freezing here?
At Love's appearing,
All the sky clearing,
The stormy winds their fury spare.
Thou doting fool, forbear, forbear!
What dost thou mean by freezing here?
Winter subduing,
And Spring renewing,
My beams create a more glorious year.

Cold Genius

Great Love, I know thee now:
Eldest of the gods art thou.
Heav'n and earth by thee were made.
Human nature is thy creature.
Ev'rywhere thou art obey'd.

Cupid

No part of my dominion shall be waste:
To spread my sway and sing my praise.
E'en here, e'en here I will a people raise
Of kind embracing lovers and embrac'd.

Prelude

Chorus of Cold People

See, see, we assemble
Thy revels to hold,
Tho' quiv'ring with cold,
We chatter and tremble.

Dance

Cupid

'Tis I, 'tis I that have warm'd ye.
In spite of cold weather
I've brought ye together.

Ritornello

Chorus

'Tis Love that has warm'd us ...

Cupid and Genius

Sound a parley, ye fair, and surrender.
Set yourselves and your lovers at ease.
He's a grateful offender
Who pleasure dare seize:
But the whining pretender
Is sure to displease.
Sound a parley, ye fair, and surrender.
Since the fruit of desire is possessing,
'Tis unmanly to sigh and complain.
When we kneel for redressing,
We move your disdain.
Love was made for a blessing
And not for a pain.

Ritornello

Chorus

'Tis Love that has warm'd us ...

Borée

Act IV

Air

Soft Musick

Two Sirens

Two daughters of this aged stream are we,
And both our sea-green locks have comb'd for ye.
Come, come, bathe with us an hour or two;
Come, come naked in for we are so,
What danger from a naked foe?
Come, come, bathe with us and share
What pleasures in the floods appear.
We'll beat the waters till they bound
And circle round.

Passacaglia

Song continues overleaf. Please turn the page as quietly as possible.

Tenor

How happy the lover,
How easy his chain!
How happy the lover,
How pleasing his pain!
How sweet to discover
He sighs not in vain.

Chorus

How happy the lover ...

Ritornello

Sylvan and Nymph

For love ev'ry creature
Is form'd by his nature.
No joys are above
The pleasures of love.

Chorus

No joys are above
The pleasures of love.

Three Nymphs

In vain are our graces,
In vain are your eyes.
If love you despise,
When age furrows faces
'Tis too late to be wise.

Three Men

Then use the sweet blessing
While now in possessing.
No joys are above
The pleasures of love.

Three Nymphs

No joys are above
The pleasures of love.

Chorus

No joys ...

Trumpet Tune

Act V

Aeolus

Ye blust'ring brethren of the skies,
Whose breath has ruffled all the wat'ry plain,
Retire and let Britannia rise
In triumph o'er the main.
Serene and calm and void of fear,
The Queen of Islands must appear.

Symphony

Song Tune

Nereid and Pan

Round thy coast, fair nymph of Britain,
For thy guard our waters flow.
Proteus all his herds admitting
On thy green to graze below.
Foreign lands thy fish are tasting;
Learn from their luxurious fasting.

Chorus

Round thy coast, fair nymph of Britain ...

Alto, Tenor and Bass

For folded flocks, on fruitful plains,
The shepherd's and the farmer's gains,
Fair Britain all the world outvies;
And Pan, as in Arcadia, reigns
Where pleasure mix'd with profit lies.
Tho' Jason's fleece was fam'd of old,
The British wool is growing gold;
No mines can more of wealth supply,
It keeps the peasants from the cold,
And takes for kings the Tyrian dye.

Song Tune

Comus

Your hay it is mow'd and your corn is reap'd,
Your barns will be full and your hovels heap'd.
Come, boys, come,
And merrily roar out our harvest home.

Chorus

Come, boys, come,
And merrily roar out our harvest home.

Comus

We've cheated the parson, we'll cheat him again,
For why shou'd a blockhead have one in ten?
One in ten, one in ten ...

All

One in ten, one in ten,
For why should a blockhead have one in ten?

Comus

For prating so long, like a book-learn'd sot,
Till pudding and dumpling are burnt to pot;
Burnt to pot, burnt to pot ...

All

Burnt to pot, burnt to pot,
Till pudding and dumpling are burnt to pot.

Comus

We'll toss off our ale till we cannot stand;
And heigh for the honour of old England;
Old England, old England ...

All

Old England, old England,
And heigh for the honour of old England.

Song Tune

Venus

Fairest Isle, all isles excelling,
Seat of pleasure and of love,
Venus here will choose her dwelling,
And forsake her Cyprian grove.
Cupid from his fav'rite nation
Care and envy will remove;
Jealousy that poisons passion,
And despair that dies for love.
Gentle murmurs, sweet complaining,
Sighs that blow the fire of love,
Soft repulses, kind disdain,
Shall be all the pains you prove.
Ev'ry swain shall pay his duty,
Grateful ev'ry nymph shall prove;
And as these excel in beauty,
Those shall be renown'd for love.

She

You say, 'tis Love creates the pain
Of which so sadly you complain,
And yet would fain engage my heart
In that uneasy cruel part;
But how, alas! think you that I
Can bear the wounds of which you die?

He

'Tis not my passion makes my care
But your indifference gives despair:
The lusty sun begets no spring
Till gentle show'rs assistance bring;
So Love, that scorches and destroys,
Till kindness aid, can cause no joys.

She

Love has a thousand ways to please,
But more to rob us of our ease;
For waking nights and careful days,
Some hours of pleasure he repays;
But absence soon, or jealous fears,
O'erflows the joy with floods of tears.

He

But one soft moment makes amends
For all the torment that attends.

She and He

Let us love and to happiness haste.
Age and wisdom come too fast.
Youth for loving was design'd.

She

You be constant, I'll be kind.

He

I'll be constant, you be kind.

She and He

Heav'n can give no greater blessing
Than faithful love and kind possessing.

Trumpet Tune

Honour

Saint George the patron of our Isle!
A soldier and a saint!
On this auspicious order smile,
Which love and arms will plant.

Chorus

Our natives not alone appear
To court the martial prize;
But foreign kings adopted here
Their crowns at home despise.
Our Sov'reign high in awful state
His honours shall bestow;
And see his sceptred subjects wait
On his commands below.

Chaconne