

"These sorts of Entertainments are principally design'd for the Ear and the Eye; and therefore in Reason my Art on this occasion, ought to be subservient to his." So wrote John Dryden, the librettist for *King Arthur, or The British Worthy*, in a preface to the 1691 printed edition. The work had premiered that same year, thanks to the entrepreneurship of Thomas Betterton, director of London's most prominent- and at the time only- theatrical producer, the United Company. Nevertheless, Dryden shows deference here not to the Art(hur) of the director, but of the composer Henry Purcell.

Barely in his thirties, Purcell had established himself as a formidable figure on the London scene. He held the position of organist at both Westminster Abbey and the Chapel Royal, and was already renowned as a composer of church, court and theatre music. Indeed, such was Purcell's standing, that in 1690, Betterton put his commercial reputation on the line with *Dioclesian*, an operatic collaboration between himself, the composer and two dramatists (John Fletcher and Philip Massinger). Dryden also contributed with a Prologue, though this was cut after the first performance due to its sensitive political content.

To understand the enormity of this risk, it is worth considering the United Company's circumstances. London at the time was strongly ambivalent towards opera, mainly because it was perceived as 'foreign'. There is no better demonstration of this than the fate of a previous operatic venture, *Albion and Albanus*, some five years before. The creation of Betterton, Dryden and Louis Grabu (a much-forgotten Spanish composer imported by Charles II), this *tragédie en musique* in the French style was originally conceived as the prologue for an early draft of *King Arthur*. Dryden, believing the material to have merit in its own right, subsequently expanded it into a three-act opera. Sadly for him and his creative partners, however, *Albion and Albanus* was a resounding flop commercially. What's more, its general lacklustre, along with a changing political climate, meant that first version of *Arthur* was never realised. A track record like that makes Betterton's rekindled operatic ambition seem foolish, but presumably he was banking on a rising compositional star making all the difference.

The gamble paid off: *Dioclesian* was a great success, due partly to the sumptuous production values demanded by both its Classical subject matter and a rapacious Restoration public, and partly to Purcell's music, which showed considerable sensitivity to the tragicomic drama. As Purcell wrote in the Dedication to its patron, the Duke of Somerset, "[Music and Poetry] may excel apart, but sure they are most excellent when they are joyn'd, because nothing is then wanting to either of their perfections: for thus they appear like wit and beauty in the same person." Small wonder then, when the chance finally came to rescue *King Arthur* from the artistic doldrums, Dryden was a willing squire to Purcell's Lancelot. Ironically however, it was not their creative kinship, but the obscene profits made by the Diocletian consortium, as well as Betterton's eagerness to capitalise on a winning formula, which provided that opportunity.

*King Arthur*, like *Dioclesian*, was a huge hit in its first season. Not coincidentally, they are also both 'semi-operas', a musicodramatic genre where the main protagonists speak, rather than sing their dialogue. Of the eighteen named roles in *Arthur*, ten are played by actors, while the bulk of the music-making is left to nameless characters of an allegorical, supernatural or inebriated nature. This type of opera was more palatable to audiences in late 17th century London than its purer Italianate cousin. In fact, Purcell himself was one of the few locals who dared tackle the latter, being not averse to musical trends from the Continent. These influences are readily apparent

in his most famous work, *Dido and Aeneas* (1688), with its Ancient setting, through-sung approach, and chic Italian recitative and ground-bass forms. By 1690, however, he was back in the patriotic fold, albeit with the technical resources of his foreign flirtations; indeed, his posterity is firmly grounded in the perceived 'Englishness' of his artistry, of which the swing back to semi-opera was a big part. Notably, the xenophobia which cemented Purcell's fame was to keep "our English genius" from relishing "perpetual Singing" – as the *Gentleman's Journal* of 1692 put it – until the arrival of Handel and Italian opera proper some twenty years later.

The theatrical bent of *King Arthur* does not end there. In addition to being semi-operatic, its first production in 1691 was what is known today as a Restoration spectacular or 'machine' play. This involved a great cornucopia of the latest technologies to create extravagant costumes, movable scenery, illusionary backdrops, supernatural creatures and airborne deities. Though the mechanical monsters of *Dioclesian* and the dancing monkeys and twelve-foot high fountain of Purcell's next hit, *The Fairy Queen*, made *King Arthur* look modest by comparison, there was still plenty of scope for grandeur in the latter's battle scenes and mythological characters.

This should not imply, however, that *King Arthur* was meant only as empty spectacle. In many ways, it mirrored the tragicomic nature of 'straight drama' in the 1690s, where comedy of manners from thirty years before – boasting such evocative titles as *Love in a Tub* – was fused with the more dour political and social commentary of the 1680s. Certainly there are scenes which evoke one or other in succession; in Act V for instance, the (presumably) earnest patriotic capitalism of "the British wool is growing gold... it keeps the peasants from the cold" is followed by the bawdy piss-up of "Your hay it is mow'd". Perhaps even more interesting are scenes in which the two traditions occupy the same dramatic arc. For example, the infamous Frost of Act III Scene 2, with its evocation of physical and emotional destitution, is thawed by Cupid's promise of Love, its jocular levity reminiscent of one of the sillier Restoration comedies.

In this highly theatrical light, it may seem strange Dryden was happy for his Verses to be made "rugged to the Reader, that they be more harmonious to the Hearer". It might appear even stranger there are purely musical performances of *King Arthur*, of which this afternoon's is certainly not the first. The truth is - and as much for Betterton, the United Company and its patrons as for us – Purcell's music expresses the real crux of the drama. Copious dialogue and diversion aside, the plot is transparent: *King Arthur* saves his (conveniently) blind fiancée, Princess of Emmeline of Cornwall, from the clutches of the dastardly Saxon King, Oswald of Kent, against a backdrop of tribal warfare between Britons and Saxons, and (un)helpful drop-ins from an impressive array of supernatural beings reflecting no less than Celtic, Teutonic and Roman mythology. In contrast, Purcell's *Art* provides the actual experiential colour – the heat of battle, the chill of the frost, the superior tensility of British wool – for the broad canvasses of Restoration theatre. So read the synopsis, or not: the music will tell the story, either way.