



Reminiscences on A Midsummer Night's Dream

Pacific Opera Victoria's 1993 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* remains one of my all-time favourite experiences with the company.

In most 19th- and 20th-century operas there is no keyboard part, meaning that the *répétiteur* is no longer required after the last piano run. It feels a bit like helping with the preparations for a wonderful party and then not being invited to it.

But Britten's operas generally do have keyboard parts, and prominent ones. *Dream* is very special in requiring a harpsichord and celesta, both contributing to a soundscape that revolves among three distinct sound worlds: those of the Fairies, the Lovers, and the Rustics (the working class) as they act and interact in the supernatural ambience of the "wood outside Athens," where most of the opera's action takes place and where only the Fairies are truly at home.

The sound world changes very definitely when we move into the palace of Theseus, and yet again during the parodic play-within-a-play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

Of the very fine 1993 cast, three in particular deserve a mention: the Helena of Newfoundland-born soprano Joanne Hounsell, a leading Victoria voice teacher; the Lysander of tenor Benjamin Butterfield, now Head of Voice at the University of Victoria; and the Snout/Wall of Patrick Corrigan, who has since assumed a different position within the world of opera production at POV. The 1993 production was led by POV's favourite team: stage director Glynis Leyshon and artistic director Timothy Vernon (who campaigned

by Robert Holliston

indefatigably for years to bring this masterpiece to the McPherson stage).

Some orchestral composers write within the established conventions of instrumentation, but Britten is not one of these. The richly varied colours in the *Dream* score are due at least in part to Britten's understanding not only of what instruments do, but of what they *can* do.

As one Victoria Symphony player remarked in the McPherson Theatre pit all those years ago, *It's as if Britten took a course in orchestration and proceeded to do everything he was taught not to do*.

Instruments are called upon to play in extreme ranges, and with extended techniques, and in unusual combinations, as in the very opening of the opera – an unsettling sequence of major chords and string *portamenti* that create the otherworldly, slightly threatening sound of the wood – and its not-always-benevolent inhabitants, the Fairies.

It is probably the world of the Fairies that I've always loved most in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – and not only because of the bewitching way in which the celesta (one of *my* instruments) contributes so strongly to it.

The role of Oberon, King of the Fairies, was written for countertenor Alfred Deller, at a time when this voice type was rarely heard even in Baroque music and hardly ever in contemporary works. Thus the very sound of the voice suggests something a bit alien to human experience. In addition, the vocal writing is beautiful (again in a slightly bizarre way) and matches the words perfectly.

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Britten The Composer as Outsider

Benjamin Britten is the most successful post-war opera composer. Between 1941 and 1963, he composed no fewer than 17 works for the stage. Most have been revived and recorded many times. No composer during Britten's lifetime – or, so far, after it – can begin to match these achievements.

In 1945 Britten produced his first operatic masterwork, *Peter Grimes*, which seems at first look to have been an unlikely smash success. After a decade and a half of deprivation brought on by the Depression and the war, a darkly violent story with a grimly taciturn title character must have seemed inappropriate to at least a few Sadler's Wells board members (a number of whom even described the score as "cacaphonic").

However, the opera was a triumph for Britten, as was its central role for his lifelong companion Peter Pears, who first articulated a theme that was to prove central to many of Britten's stage works: the outsider against the crowd.

In three fundamental areas, Britten considered himself an outsider, alienated from the crowd by moral, political, and artistic differences.

In 1939, Britten and Pears moved to the US, at least partly to distance themselves from the impending European war. Their absence during a time of understandable patriotic fervour was noticed.

When they returned to England in 1942, it was to a society not yet willing

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The Lovers present themselves to us in pairs, starting with Lysander and Hermia. Because they are genuinely in love with each other, their lyrical vocal lines interweave, conveying an ardently seductive romanticism – but underneath, a series of slightly dissonant chords, played by the horns in a subtly unsettling rhythm, reminds us that, to borrow Lysander's words, *the course of true love never did run smooth*. The sparring of Demetrius and Helena finds the mismatched couple singing mismatched lines of music.

Each of the four Lovers will have, from time to time, beautiful lines of music to sing – and as a quartet completely at odds with one another, they share a scene of great hilarity.

But it is after all conflicts have been resolved by Oberon and his magic potion and the couples have been properly united – when all is as it should be – that these Lovers are given their most sublime music – a passage of ingenuity in which distant horns awaken them from a deep sleep and gradually bring them back to the reality of Theseus's court.

Rustic Bottom is altered by the woods as well – not only because of the ass's head he unwittingly sports, but because of his contact with a world of enchanting delights he only dimly remembers. As a group the Rustics – working class chaps who retreat into the forest to rehearse unobserved for the play-within-a-play – are unique in that we never see them in their natural habitat. They are therefore always slightly uncomfortable and out of place.

During Pyramus and Thisbe (the play-within-a-play in Act III), their music parodies a number of targets from Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* to Donizetti's *bel canto* mad scenes. (It has been said that Peter Pears, who played Flute in the original 1960 production, gave a ruthlessly precise impersonation of Joan Sutherland during this sequence, which is reminiscent of Lucia's flute-accompanied mad scene.)

It is entirely fitting that A Midsummer Night's Dream ends where it began: in the mysterious world of the Fairies, with a slow and solemn dance and a final coda from Puck.

Robert Holliston is Curator of Public Engagement for Pacific Opera Victoria. He has given POV's pre-performance lobby lectures since 1993 and has previously served as our Répétiteur, Chorus Master, and Principal Coach. He hosts POV's INSIDE OPERA, Opera Motifs, and Artist Lounge events.

Visit POV's website at www.pov.bc.ca/dream.html for the full version of these articles, along with video links (among them a parody of Shakespeare's version of Pyramus and Thisbe by none other than the Beatles).

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to embrace their pacifist philosophy. Not until the peace movement of the 1960s would Britten find himself, albeit unwittingly, in sync with the socio-political spirit of his time.

And not until 1967 would England legalize homosexual acts between consenting adults – meaning that throughout most of their time together, Britten and Pears were outside not only society's mores but also its laws. Of course the nature of their relationship was widely understood – despite Britten's refusal to acknowledge it publicly even after 1967. That they were clearly accepted by admirers, colleagues, and even members of the Royal family did not protect the couple from narrow-minded bigots or from barbed remarks.

Most importantly, Britten felt that the idiosyncratic style of his music alienated him not only from those who preferred more conventional fare, but from *avant garde* composers who considered his work irrelevant and anachronistic.

To a younger generation of artists experimenting with electronic music, total serialism, and *musique concrète*, the very idea of writing for opera houses seemed like pandering to the public. Indeed, since opera went public in 1637, it has always depended for its continued existence on satisfying the tastes of those who buy tickets at the box office.

Many composers of the 1950s doubted that the audience's needs should ever be taken into account. Britten's own contention, that the artist should *speak to or for his fellow human beings* seemed risibly old-hat. Yet between the extremes of conservatism and radicalism, Britten's public was enthusiastic and large enough to guarantee Britten two enduring operatic successes in the 50s: *Billy Budd* and *The Turn of the Screw*.

By the early 1960s – with the successful premières of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the *War Requiem* behind him and the yearly Aldeburgh Festival firmly established as a major cultural event – Britten's stature within the profession was incontestable.

In 1964 Britten received the first Robert O. Anderson Aspen Award in the Humanities, honouring *the individual anywhere in the world judged to have made the greatest contribution to the advancement of the humanities*.

In his acceptance speech the composer expressed his thoughts about himself and his work: ***I want my music to be of use to people, to please them, to enhance their lives ... I write music, now, in Aldeburgh, for people living there, and further afield, indeed for anyone who cares to play it or listen to it.***

Today, 40 years after the composer's death, companies throughout the world continue to produce Benjamin Britten's operas. *Avant garde* composers and critics continue to treat them condescendingly, just as the occasional audience member continues to wish the music was a bit less complex and a bit more hummable (many a Broadway musical lover has been heard saying the same thing about Stephen Sondheim).

The works themselves continue to challenge and bewitch, with their unique orchestral soundscapes, gloriously imaginative (and often quite hummable) melodies, and flawless (if frequently surprising) word setting. And the pervasive theme of the outsider's treatment by an often uncomprehending society continues to resonate with audiences of all persuasions, professions, races, and tax brackets, just as it always did with Britten himself.

Robert Holliston

Discover more about
A Midsummer Night's Dream
www.pov.bc.ca/dream.html

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Designs for Dream Characters

One of the joys of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is that it is jam-packed with possibility. Its three intersecting worlds – Fairies, Human lovers and Rustic tradesmen – confer marvellous scope for theatrical colour and whimsy.

Director Tom Diamond and Designer Judith Bowden (who in 2010 teamed up for POV's delectable *Cinderella*) are preparing yet another magical production – as you can see from this glimpse of some of Judith's charming costume sketches.



The Fairies include the slightly sinister king, Oberon, who exacts a spiteful revenge on his wife Tytania by foisting on her a love potion that will make her fall in love with the first creature she sees. And there's Puck, the mischievous sprite who gives Bottom a donkey's head just for the fun of it, and whose scrambled spells cause most of the accidental chaos in the opera.

The rest of the fairies (including Moth, at left) are small and adorable (played by a chorus of boy trebles), but their mission is to serve and protect their queen, Tytania, fending off snakes, hedgehogs, spiders, and all other threats.



The Human lovers include Theseus and Hippolyta, the duke of Athens and the queen of the Amazons. Theseus has won his bride by defeating her in battle. She doesn't seem to mind. Their pending nuptials are the impetus for the Rustics' venture into show business.

Two other young couples – Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius – spend the night in the woods, pursuing and pursued by one another, getting lost, and, enthralled by the love potion, madly loving now the right person, now the wrong one – until everything is finally untangled.

The Rustics comprise a half dozen tradesmen, whose performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is the opera's comic highlight. They include Quince, the carpenter, who is the self-appointed director and casting manager; Flute, the bellows-mender, who plays Thisbe (aka Thisby); Starveling, the tailor, who plays Moonshine; Snug, a joiner, who plays the Lion; and Snout (left), the tinker who plays the Wall. Bottom, the weaver, is Pyramus (but he campaigns to play all the parts, especially the lion). While sporting a donkey's head, Bottom gets the best love scene in the opera when Tytania becomes besotted with him – another casualty of Oberon's love potion.

Luxury casting for this production includes our favourite Scottish bass, Brian Bannatyne-Scott, as Bottom. Rounding out the Rustic thespians are Bruce Kelly, Lawrence Wiliford, Giles Tomkins, Kaden Forsberg, and Andrew Erasmus. Coloratura soprano Suzanne Rigden is Tytania,



Snout with his tinker's toolbox & kettle (we assume he has just repaired it and is about to brew himself a pot of tea).

with countertenor David Trudgen as Oberon. Making his opera debut as Puck is Toronto theatre artist Daniel Ellis, while Victoria's Susan Platts returns as Hippolyta, with Stephen Hegedus as Theseus. The four young lovers are Adam Fisher and Lauren Segal as Lysander and Hermia, with John Brancy and Betty Wayne Allison as Demetrius and Helena. Timothy Vernon conducts the Victoria Symphony, and Giuseppe Pietrarroia directs the Children's Chorus.



Maureen Woodall

2016/17 Season Preview

NOW IS THE TIME TO RESERVE YOUR 2016/17 SEASON SUBSCRIPTION.

POV's 2016/17 season opens with Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*. Set amid the roiling politics of 14th century Italy, this drama proves how little has changed over the centuries. Affairs of state are still driven by backroom deals, conspiracy, even murder. And emotions – love, grief, vengeance – are often at the heart of political action.

Simon Boccanegra is Verdi at his most humane and subtle: the music is haunting, full of grace and grandeur; the characters are flawed, vivid, compelling. The whole opera is an eloquent call for magnanimity and reconciliation. Todd Thomas, gripping as Alberich in *Das Rheingold* and Iago in *Otello*, returns in the title role. Glynis Leyshon directs.

February brings mystery, danger, laughter – and the most enchanting music in the world, with Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Director Oriol Tomas, who recently won a major competition to direct a co-production with 16 French opera houses, will work with renowned Cirque du Soleil Creative Director Patricia Ruel to devise a magical universe for this most bewitching of operas.

In April, an acclaimed Canadian play finds new life as an opera with Michel Marc Bouchard's *Les Feluettes (Lilies)*. This new work, co-commissioned and co-produced by POV and Opéra de Montréal, makes its world première in Montreal this May, followed by the Victoria staging in April 2017. Timothy Vernon conducts the performances in both cities. The cast includes James McLennan, Gordon Gietz, and Aaron St. Clair Nicholson, all recently seen on POV's stage. Among those making POV debuts are internationally renowned baritone Gino Quilico, along with Daniel Cabena, whom CBC has called *Canada's next countertenor superstar*.

Les Feluettes is a romantic drama set in a prison, where inmates dramatize a decades-old tragedy to draw out the truth of a devastating love triangle.

Australian composer Kevin March evokes a tapestry of musical styles, from waltz rhythms and French Canadian folk music to the sophisticated lushness and delicacy of Debussy, all of it grounded in the splendour of Bouchard's language.

Order your 2016/17 season subscriptions online at www.pov.bc.ca, by phone at 250-385-0222, or at performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

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Events

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

April 14, 16, 22, at 8 pm Sunday, April 24, at 2:30 pm

Royal Theatre
Pre-performance
lobby lecture
1 hour before curtain

COMMUNITY EVENTS

INSIDE OPERA at the UNION CLUB

Friday, April 1, 11:45 am to 1:15 pm

Union Club Centennial Ballroom, 805 Gordon St.

Robert Holliston talks about *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with guests from the cast. Dress code: Business Dress. **\$35 per person includes lunch.** Please call 250.382.1641 by March 29 to reserve with payment.

INSIDE OPERA with Robert Holliston Sunday, April 3 2 sessions: 10 am & noon. Phillip T. Young Recital Hall, UVic

Robert and guests present a guided tour of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Bring your friends. **Free event. Free parking.** RSVP by noon April 1: 250-382-1641 or rsvp@pov.bc.ca.

Sense of Occasion

Thursday, April 14, 6:30 pm, East Lobby, Royal Theatre

Pre-performance reception to celebrate the opening night of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Gourmet finger foods and wine. Space is limited. Dress is festive. **\$35 per person.** Reserve with payment by April 8: 250-382-1641.

A Midsummer Night's Dream and Music

Exhibit opens April 14, in room A005, Mearns Centre for Learning at UVic's McPherson Library

Books, Scores, and Theatrical Ephemera from the University of Victoria's Special Collections Library.

BAUMANN CENTRE EVENTS

925 Balmoral Road

RSVP to 250-382-1641 or rsvp@pov.bc.ca

Opera Motifs Tuesday, April 5, 7 pm

Robert Holliston explores the role of children in Britten's music. Guest appearance by the Victoria Children's Choir, directed by Madeleine Humer, with pianist Jane Edler-Davis. Free.

Artist Lounge Wednesday, April 13, 7 pm

An intimate evening of curated discussion with visiting artists from the opera's creative team. Free.

Master Class Monday, April 18, 7 pm

A cast member from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* coaches three singers. With Tatiana Vassilieva on piano. Free.

Lunchbox Opera Tuesday, April 19, 12:30 pm

An all-Sondheim program curated by Robert Holliston, with special guests. Bring your lunch or pre-order a Zambri's lunchbox for \$15 (order by April 15: 250-382-1641).

DONOR RECOGNITION EVENT

President's Circle Working Rehearsal

Monday, April 11, Royal Theatre

6 pm Coffee and cookies

6:20 pm Discussion with Director Tom Diamond

7 pm Orchestra Dress rehearsal begins

For members of the Impresario Circle and President's Circle. Invitations have been mailed. RSVP by April 5 to 250-382-1641 or rsvp@pov.bc.ca.

A one-act opera presented in collaboration
with Intrepid Theatre's Uno Fest

Poulenc LA VOIX HUMAINE

May 12, 14, 18, 20, 7:30 pm
May 22, 2:30 pm

The Baumann Centre
925 Balmoral Rd

Starring Kathleen Brett, with Robert Holliston on piano
Directed by Diana Leblanc

*The telephone is
sometimes more
dangerous than
the revolver.*

Jean Cocteau

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We hear only her side of the conversation as she tries to win him back and keep him talking.

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Adults: \$25
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Sunday, April 10, 6 pm

Carson Hall

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Gala Chairman: Eric Charman

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Event Information: www.pov.bc.ca/calendar.html

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