THE FAIRY QUEEN

HENRY PURCELL

BACKGROUND

Henry Purcell’s operatic work invites us to a genuinely Baroque drama that may be baffling to the French public whose taste has been fashioned by institutions of the Classical era. The Fairy Queen was first performed in London in 1692. At the same time, Italy began to export opera seria whose codes, interpreters and architecture were to appeal Europeans, while in France, five years after Lully’s death, Paris Opera maintained the art of tragédie en musique. Both genres are regular, distinct from spoken drama and dominated by a continuous score, leading to the unfolding of vocal virtuosity in Italy and choreography in France.

After the Restoration of the monarchy and the reopening of theaters outlawed under Cromwell’s dictatorship, the issue of genres did not really matter. Above all, the English wanted to establish a national stage. They built closed theaters inspired by Continental playhouses in which the relationship between upper-class audiences and the actors ceased to be interactive as was the case in Shakespeare’s time. They allowed women to take the stage as performers. They displayed prodigious inventiveness in terms of scenery and embellished performances with incidental music. As for the repertoire, it combined revivals from the rich Elizabethan output with historical patriotic themes. One century after his premieres, Shakespeare enjoyed a second youth. The adaptations of Macbeth, The Tempest and A Midsummer Night’s Dream made him the English dramatic genius, a fame the Enlightenment was to give universal proportions.

At the Dorset Garden Theatre, the United Company began to produce semi-operas on a regular basis in the 1690s. Drawing forms rather than a pattern from Continental influences, semi-opera incorporated extensive musical scenes, or masques, into a large-scale spoken piece. English opera with recitative had aborted after the first attempt of The Siege of Rhodes by Davenant in 1656 and the confidential premiere of Venus and Adonis by John Blow at court in 1683. Yet, theater music flourished. The best musicians were in demand and Purcell, the leading musician in the kingdom, proved decisive for the English public to accept an operatic genre that stemmed from spoken drama. In turn, semi-opera contributed to the popularity of Purcell who, in addition to a lot of incidental music, composed four complete semi-operas. As a hybrid, semi-opera is similar to comédie-ballet devised by Molière and Lully to liven up evenings at the court of Versailles in the 1660s. The two transitory genres inherited discontinuous court ballet of the Renaissance and prepared the way for continuous opera of the Classical era. The French, enthralled by tragédie en musique initiated by Lully in 1673 with Cadmus et Hermione, retained the texts of comédie-ballet, whereas the English preserved their scores in their own language after the spread of Italian opera in the early 18th century. That is why Le Bourgeois gentilhomme is primarily by Molière and The Fairy Queen by Purcell. Thus, the title The Fairy Queen rather than A Midsummer Night’s Dream indicates a change in both form and subject.
In the adaptation of Shakespeare’s text, probably by Thomas Betterton, a central character is removed: Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons betrothed to the Duke of Athens by the end of the play. Of the four love plots there remain only three: the reconciliation between the fairy queen and king, the confusion of the Athenian lovers and the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe, a play within the play and a model from Romeo and Juliet handled in a burlesque way. The fairies’ nobleness is all the more highlighted, especially that of Oberon, a monarch to be found in many stories since the medieval chanson de geste entitled Huon de Bordeaux et Aubéron roi de féerie. Oberon already danced in a masquerade by Ben Jonson performed at court in 1611 and, through a tale by Wieland, sang in the eponymous English opera by Carl Maria von Weber in 1826. But even more typical of Celtic folklore is Oberon’s familiar figure as a mischievous sprite Puck, aka Robin Goodfellow.

Titania the fairy queen deserves the honors of the title as she, reigning over night and nature, requests or receives the musical entertainments of semi-opera. A familiar figure to the English of the Renaissance, she inspired a great epic poem to Edmund Spenser – one of Shakespeare’s masters – and was the central character of the famous court ballet performed in 1591 at Elvetham in honor of Queen Elizabeth – of whom she was overtly the counterpart performed by Ben Jonson in 1611 and, through a masquerade by Purcell, who had published a selection of arias for amateurs, added new pieces, including the drunken poet scene to conclude Act One. The score, which was lost during two centuries, was to become an emblem of English musical genius in the 20th century and Benjamin Britten asserted its founding character by composing A Midsummer Night’s Dream in 1960. Meanwhile, a great many composers drew their inspiration from Shakespeare, Rossini, Verdi, Bellini, Mendelssohn, Gounod or Berlioz.

A jewel of English culture, The Fairy Queen is presented at both the Glyndebourne Festival and the Opéra Comique and revives, in its full-length version, creative and liberating Baroque drama.

**SYNOPSIS**

**Act I**

Theseus, Duke of Athens, makes sure the laws are enforced and the children submit to paternal authority. Thus, young Hermia must marry Demetrius as demanded by her father Egeus. Yet she is in love with Lysander and both decide to run away. But their plan stirs up jealousy in unfortunate Helena. Did not Demetrius abandon her after he seduced her? To win back his favour, she tells him that his fiancée has eloped with Lysander. In the woods near Athens, some craftsmen meet to perform the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe for the duke. There, Titania the Fairy Queen hides her adoptive child from her jealous husband Oberon. By his order, the elves drive the intruders away tormenting them.

**A drunken poet who has come to the woods for inspiration falls into their hands.**

**Act II**

At night a conflict breaks out between Oberon and Titania, reproaching one another’s extramarital affairs and arguing about who is to have the
orphan. Oberon decides to chastise his wife as well as Athenian Demetrius, whose disloyalty he condemns. So his sprite Puck will use the irresistible juice from a love flower. During the Masque of Sleep, Night, Mystery, Secrecy and Sleep deaden Titania’s senses and vigilance. Puck casts a spell on her so that she succumbs to the first arrival but he mixes up the Athenian lovers.

Act III
On awaking, Lysander becomes enamoured of Helena and forsakes Hermia. The artisans’ dramatic rehearsal sinks into a ludicrous caricature as Puck intervenes. He chooses Bottom, the most conceited among these dabbler’s, and turns his head into a donkey’s, making his companions flee, but the Fairy Queen falls in love with him as she opens her eyes. Titania endeavours to hold back Bottom by offering him the Masque of Seduction by way of entertainment.

Act IV
Oberon has sent Puck to redress his mistake as the four lovers are extremely confused. Before dawn Oberon takes hold of the child and releases Titania from the spell. The lovers awake from their dream and the two pairs are properly matched in the end. The King and Queen of the fairies seal their reconciliation with a great party, the Masque of the New Day, during which Phoebus presents them with the Seasons.

Act V
Content with the new moods of the two Athenian couples, Duke Theseus requires their nuptials. Eventually, the artisans can present their burlesque performance.

But the celebration ends with greater dignity in the presence of Titania and Oberon with the Masque of Marriage during which Juno herself instructs the newly-weds in the delights and dangers of their new condition.