

## **Colin Ure's Guide to *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

**Opera in three acts by Benjamin Britten**

**Based on the play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by William Shakespeare, adapted by Benjamin Britten, and Peter Pears**

**Premiere at the Aldeburgh Festival on June 11, 1960**

### **Dramatis Personae in the opera, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.**

|  |                    |
|--|--------------------|
| Theseus, Duke of Athens                          | bass               |
| Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, his betrothed   | contralto          |
| Hermia, daughter of Egeus, in love with Lysander | mezzo-soprano      |
| Helena, Hermia's friend, in love with Demetrius  | soprano            |
| Lysander, in love with Hermia                    | tenor              |
| Demetrius, in love with Hermia                   | baritone           |
|  |                    |
| Oberon, King of the Fairies                      | counter-tenor      |
| Tytania, Queen of the Fairies                    | coloratura soprano |
| Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, Oberon's lieutenant   | actor/acrobat      |
| Peaseblossom, a fairy follower of Tytania        | boy treble         |
| Cobweb, a fairy follower of Tytania              | boy treble         |
| Moth, a fairy follower of Tytania                | boy treble         |
| Mustardseed, a fairy follower of Tytania         | boy treble         |
| A Fairy  | boy treble         |
|  |                    |
| Peter Quince, a carpenter, also                  |                    |
| Prologue in the play, <i>Pyramus and Thisbe</i>  | bass               |
| Nick Bottom, a weaver, and Pyramus               | bass               |
| Francis Flute, a bellows-mender, and Thisbe      | tenor              |
| Tom Snout, a tinker, and Wall                    | tenor              |
| Snug, a joiner, and Lion                         | bass               |
| Starveling, a tailor, and Moonshine              | baritone           |

***“If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this and all is mended,  
That you have but slumbered here  
While these visions did appear”  
(Puck) ... A Midsummer Night's Dream***

## **The English Opera Group, and the Aldeburgh Festival**

In 1945 the excitement generated by Benjamin Britten's large-scale opera, *Peter Grimes*, not only established his reputation as a major operatic force, but as the most important British operatic composer since Henry Purcell in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Although *Peter Grimes* had been highly successful, arts funding in Britain in the late 1940's was virtually non-existent, all necessary monies being channeled towards the country's economic recovery following the ravages of the Second World War. The musical world would need to wait until 1951 when Britten's second large-scale opera *Billy Budd* premiered, commissioned to be part of the country's Festival of Britain celebrations taking place that year.

So in 1947, Britten supported by several close friends created the English Opera Group, providing him, and many other contemporary composers with a platform for chamber opera productions which could be toured throughout Britain and Europe. However it soon became apparent that the EOG needed a permanent home, so in 1948 Britten, his partner Peter Pears, and the writer and producer, Eric Crozier founded the Aldeburgh Festival in a small market town on the south-east coast of England where Britten and Pears had set up home. Over the next few years the Aldeburgh Festival developed dramatically to include music, poetry, drama, literature and visual art, with performances, lectures, and exhibitions taking place in a variety of venues both in the town of Aldeburgh and in neighboring villages and churches.

***“Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania”***  
**(Oberon)**

***“Fairies, skip hence; I have forsworn his bed and company”***  
**(Titania) ... *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

It is not known exactly in which year Shakespeare wrote his comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however due to the style of the play, its inclusion in a literary source of the period, and the date of its first edition in 1600, it was probably written around the mid 1590's. Some scholars believe that the play may have been written to celebrate a wedding. Whether this is the case or not, the theme of the play is certainly about love and marriage focusing on the forthcoming nuptials of Theseus, Duke of Athens, and his warrior bride, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons; the complex and changing affections of the four young lovers, Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius; and the fight between Oberon and Titania for the possession of a young changling boy. Others contend that the play was written to glorify Queen Elizabeth I, depicted as the character of Theseus, a magnanimous ruler who cares for his subjects, desires their love in return, and is also a lover of the arts.

The play is set in two distinct worlds; the mortal world of Theseus' court in Athens, and the magical, fairy, world of the wood ruled by Oberon and Titania, the king and queen of the fairies. The play focuses on three distinct groups of characters; the fairies, the lovers, and the mechanicals, each group experiencing in these two opposing worlds the changing fortunes of love and friendship.

***“And to that place the sharp Athenian law {compelling thee to marry with Demetrius} cannot pursue us”***

**(Lysander) ... the opera, *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

From the earliest days of the Aldeburgh Festival it had been obvious that the small Jubilee Hall in Aldeburgh was woefully unsuited to the many stage productions presented there, so by the late 1950's it was decided to enlarge the Hall. In 1959 Britten decided to commemorate the occasion by composing an opera which would be performed in the newly renovated Hall the following year, his choice of subject being Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Britten and Pears also decided to write the libretto themselves protesting that time was of the essence, and by basing the new opera on an existing text, the financial costs of commissioning a new libretto would be removed, thereby proving beneficial to the Festival's budget.

In order for the opera to be of a realistic length Britten and Pears made substantial cuts to Shakespeare's play removing all of Act One set in Athens, apart from a few lines for Theseus and Hippolyta which were moved to the final act of the opera. By doing this they changed the dramatic structure of the play, the opera now opening and closing in the Fairy world of the wood as opposed to the mortal world of Athens, as per Shakespeare's original.

However, this fundamental change presented a dramatic problem for the opera, how to explain Hermia and Lysander's flight from Athens to the wood. In the play Hermia's father insists that she marry Demetrius, and not her true love Lysander. Should Hermia refuse her fathers' will she must under Athenian law, choose death, or seclusion in a convent. For a while Britten toyed with the idea of a short prologue explaining the lovers' flight from Athens, and indeed a few sketched pages can be found in the Britten library in Snape. However in the end Britten felt the change of emphasis from the mortal to the fairy world suited his musical vision for the opera, so to overcome the problem Britten and Pears were forced to add six words of non-Shakespearean text to Lysander's speech sung to Hermia in the wood - *“compelling thee to marry with Demetrius”* One other important change was the spelling of the Fairy Queen's name from Titania, to Tytania, this change making the name more suitable for singing.

***“I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was”***

**(Bottom) ... *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

An important aspect for Britten when considering Shakespeare's play was its dream world setting in the magic wood. In an interview with Donald Mitchell, the Britten scholar, the composer had told him of his fascination with dreams and the subconscious mind, a world induced by sleep. Britten had already set several poems about sleep in some of his earlier compositions, most notably the *Nocturne for tenor, 7 obbligato instruments and strings*, which he had written for Peter Pears in 1958

***“A lovely Boy was plucking fruits, by moonlight, in a wilderness”***

**(Nocturne) ... *The Wanderings of Cain* – Samuel Coleridge Taylor**

In the *Nocturne* Britten includes Coleridge's poem, the composer clearly fascinated at the dangerous plight of this vulnerable, young boy who seems abandoned, or lost, and bathed by moonlight in a wilderness.

***“I do but beg a little changling boy to be my henchman”  
(Oberon) ... A Midsummer Night’s Dream***

The plight of an innocent is also at the heart of Shakespeare’s play; Oberon and Titania’s fight over the ownership of the changling boy. The theme of innocence percolates throughout Britten’s operas. In *Peter Grimes* it is the accidental death of the boy apprentices; in *Billy Budd*, the utter destruction of Billy’s goodness; and in *Albert Herring*, his coming of age as we follow his journey from innocent young man to sexually aware adult.

***“I am the hidden life that stirs when the candle is out”  
(Peter Quint) ... The Turn of the Screw***

However the most disturbing example of all is found in Britten’s 1954 chamber opera *The Turn of the Screw*. Based on the ghost story by Henry James, the work focuses on the battle of wills between the ghostly character of Peter Quint, and Miles’ Governess, their actions eventually responsible for the boy’s death. Indeed *The Turn of the Screw* was clearly in Britten’s mind when composing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as tonalities, instrumentation, and musical figures which he used in *The Turn of the Screw* resurface in the later opera, with Britten’s musical creation of Oberon very similar in many ways to that of Peter Quint.

Another aspect which greatly appealed to Britten when considering Shakespeare’s play was composing music for the three distinct groups of characters; the fairies, the lovers, and the mechanicals, or *rustics*, as Britten preferred to call them. However the wood, in which all but the last scene of the opera takes place, is an important fourth musical element in Britten’s work.

Britten was a past master at creating musical landscapes or worlds, a skill he had developed from his early compositional days in the 1930’s when he wrote music to accompany short films presented by the General Post Office Film Unit. Britten’s ability to create evocative sound-scapes is apparent in his earlier scores for *Peter Grimes*, and *Billy Budd*, where his music creates two very different sound worlds.

***“Thou told’st me they were stol’n unto this wood”  
(Demetrius) ... A Midsummer Night’s Dream***

To create the sound world of Oberon’s magical wood Britten writes a series of unrelated chords based on the twelve notes found in the chromatic scale. This twelve-note technique, or dodecaphony, was originally invented by the Austrian composer Arnold Schonberg. Using this progression of chords linked to each other by glissandi effects in the lower strings of the orchestra, Britten creates a wood which appears to be breathing with life, the contrasted musical colors of these chords depicting a surreal, unnatural world of shifting perspectives and dreams, its music influencing and dominating the characters.

***“There sleeps Titania sometime of the night, lull’d in these flowers with dances and delight”***

**(Oberon) ... *A Midsummer Night’s Dream***

The wood is the domain of Oberon, King of the Fairies, and his feisty consort, Tytania. To create these characters from another world Britten conceived the roles for counter-tenor and coloratura soprano. The role of Oberon was originally created by the English counter-tenor Alfred Deller, a singer who did much to popularize the counter tenor voice and its pivotal role in baroque music, particularly the music of the 17th century English composer Henry Purcell. However in 1960 the counter-tenor voice was not heard as frequently in performance as it is today so the casting of this voice was not only unconventional for the time, but fitted Britten's vision for the role to perfection.

As is customary for characters in Britten's operas certain instruments are used to color their identity, personality, and moods, and the role of Oberon is no exception, the character being accompanied by the otherworldly sound of the celeste, harp, and percussion instruments, the same combination of instruments associated with the character of Peter Quint. Throughout the opera Oberon tussles with Tytania for ownership of the changling boy and it is testament to Britten's genius that the flamboyant flourishes heard in Tytania's vocal music do not overpower the lower lying vocal line written for Oberon. Britten's love for the music of Purcell is widely known, indeed he wrote arrangements to many of Purcell's songs, and Purcell's style of vocal writing is very much in evidence in the music Britten composes for Oberon, no more so than in his evocative aria *"I know a bank where the wild thyme blows"*

***“Therefore the winds have sucked up from the seas contagious fogs”***  
**(Oberon and Tytania) ... the opera, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream***

Nature and the elements are an important force in the opera. The battle between Oberon and Tytania creates disorder in the world of nature, causing the mortals to become confused and disorientated. It is only with Oberon's victory over Tytania, resulting in his ownership of the changling boy, that unity between the fairy consorts returns, bringing peace and stability not only throughout the fairy kingdom, but to the mortal characters as well. Musically Oberon's victory over Tytania is shown by the removal of the feisty, coloratura flourishes in her vocal music. From now until the end of the opera, her vocal line is calmly lyrical blending in with the music for Oberon and the fairies.

***“And with the juice of this I’ll streak her eyes, and make her full of hateful fantasies”***

**(Oberon) ... *A Midsummer Night’s Dream***

Just as characters have instruments, or groups of instruments associated with them, Britten also secures specific tonalities to characters or situations as well. An important example is the magic spell which Oberon casts over Tytania, and the lovers, its tonality firmly rooted between B flat and E flat. This musical figure is used to underline Oberon's spell like chant "*Be it on lion, bear or wolf, or bull, on meddling monkey or busy ape*" the theme used to accompany the magic flower, *Love-in-idleness*

We soon discover that Oberon uses his magic spell both in a malicious and caring manner. His malicious side is made apparent when he orders Puck to anoint Tytania's eyes with the flower *Love-in-idleness*, so that upon waking she will behold a creature of hateful aspect, who turns out to be Bottom in asinine form. However we see Oberon's caring side directly afterwards, when he orders Puck to anoint Demetrius' eyes so that when he awakens, he will gaze upon Helena, who up until now he has spurned most cruelly. Unfortunately Oberon is not quite as omniscient as the fairy king should be and is clearly unaware that Lysander is also in the wood. The confusion and discord created amongst the four lovers is caused by Puck's innocent mistake of anointing Lysander's eyes, who upon waking, finds Helena, with whom he falls instantly in love.

***"And I have found Demetrius like a jewel, mine own, and not mine own "***  
***(Helena) ... A Midsummer Night's Dream***

The voice types for the lovers, Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius, is the standard quartet of soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, and baritone. Apart from Lysander who was originally to be performed by Britten's partner, Peter Pears, the music for the four lovers is devoid of individuality, apart from Lysander's opening line, "*How now my love? Why is your cheek so pale?*", which will become associated with the lovers and their various trials and tribulations in the wood. By adapting their text so that they sing both individually and together, Britten develops their unfolding drama to great effect, culminating in two contrasting quartet sections; the "quarrel" quartet in Act Two where they are emotionally and dramatically divided, and their "awakening" quartet in Act Three. In this latter quartet the soaring vocal lines of the four lovers intertwine, Britten showing their astonishment that their complicated, emotional turmoil seems to have been resolved by introducing an unexpected harmony each time they repeat the word "jewel"

***"And then the moon like to a silver bow now bent in heaven, shall behold the night of our solemnities"***  
***(Hippolyta) ... A Midsummer Night's Dream***

The influence of the moon is an integral element in both play and opera. It outlines the passage of time until Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding night, and also portrays the character of Theseus as an ardent lover, clearly impatient with this passage of time. Hippolyta's reference to the moon as a silver bow unites her warlike character as Queen of the Amazons, with Diana, the Goddess of Hunting. It is also likely that Shakespeare was flattering Elizabeth I who was a keen hunter. In the play, but not the opera, we also learn that Helena's initial infatuation for Demetrius is a direct result of his wooing her by moonlight.

We meet the fairy consorts Oberon and Tytania's by moonlight, already at war over the changling boy, and the effect of the moon clearly affects the emotions of the lovers. Love, associated with a state of madness, is a recurring theme especially for women in Shakespeare's plays, and Puck makes this clear with his reference to Helena "*Cupid is a knavish lad thus to make poor females mad*" In lighter vein the moon is also introduced into the world of the mechanicals and their play within a play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Not only is the moon presented to us in the guise of Starveling in the role of Moonshine, but we learn that Pyramus and Thisbe also meet by moonlight.

***"Now, fair Hippolyta our nuptial hour draws on apace"  
(Theseus) ... A Midsummer Night's Dream***

By dispensing with Shakespeare's first Act set in Athens, and by drastically removing much of their dialogue, the two remaining lovers, Theseus and his betrothed, Hippolyta, are little more than ciphers in the opera. We are first made aware of them through a series of off-stage horn calls during the awakening quartet for the lovers in Act Three. Theseus and Hippolyta are enjoying the hunt, and suddenly the mortal world of Theseus and his court in Athens makes its presence felt in Oberon's magical realm. Theseus and Hippolyta finally appear later in this act their entrance preceded by a sweeping, almost romantic orchestral introduction. Their presence, however, is merely to grant pardon to Lysander and Hermia, bless the forthcoming nuptials of the four lovers, and be witty commentators throughout the mechanical's play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

***"I am such a tender ass, if my hair but do tickle me, I must scratch"  
(Bottom) ... A Midsummer Night's Dream***

Just as Theseus is the ruler of Athens, and Oberon, the king of the wood, so Bottom is undoubtedly the king of the rustics. It is only Bottom, the lowest ranking of the mortals, who interacts with the fairly world, his simple, honest relationship with Tytania devoid of artifice, which is in complete contrast with the other more complex relationships taking place elsewhere in the wood. The short scene between Bottom and Tytania, which contains some of the work's most beautiful music, is the central point of the opera, Britten's clever use of the diatonic chords underlining their amorous coupling, culminating in Tytania's rapturous admission of love for her asinine companion.

In the play and opera, it is only Bottom who is afforded the luxury of a dream; his dream of Tytania, although his simple wits make it clear that he can make no sense of it. Like his fellow mortals, the ethereal magic of the wood confuses him, and in his great dream aria, the opera's many elements come together, Britten juxtaposing the music of Tytania and Oberon, the diatonic chords, and the theme associated with the young lovers. Bottom councils that "*man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream*" and with a return of the chords, while Bottom's voice floats in a disembodied falsetto (a wicked jibe at Oberon's countertenor) he announces that "*it shall be called Bottom's dream because it hath no bottom*"

***“I’ll put a girdle round about the earth, in forty minutes”***  
**(Puck) ... A Midsummer Night’s Dream**

The role of Puck is an interesting one, Britten describing his character as being *“amoral and innocent”* Puck is no pre-pubescent boy but a young man on the cusp of adulthood, sexually aware, and more than happy to be Oberon’s lieutenant. Puck is a non-singing role and is cast for a young actor who is also a gymnast. Throughout the opera his entrances are preceded by high lying musical fanfares on a solo trumpet, and Puck is required to leap and tumble his way through the performance just like an Olympic gymnast.

***“I will hear that play; for never anything can be amiss when simpleness and duty tender it”***  
**(Theseus) ... A Midsummer Night’s Dream**

The mechanicals, or *“hard handed men”* as they are described in Shakespeare’s play, are a motley group of characters, their vocal ranges encompassing all of the male voice types. Their personalities and antics are accompanied by jocular music played mostly by woodwind and brass instruments, this music providing the necessary contrast to the music of the lovers, and the fairies. The mechanicals come into their own in the final act with their comic play *Pyramus and Thisbe*, a comic parallel to the fortunes of the two lovers Hermia and Lysander. For this scene Britten incorporates several excellent examples of musical pastiche, most notably the aria for Snout the tinker, who plays the part of a human wall dividing the ground between Pyramus and Thisbe. For Snout’s aria Britten adopts the early 20<sup>th</sup> century style called Sprechstimme, or sung-speech, originally devised by Schonberg, Britten clearly acknowledging the composer who devised the twelve tone note row, which is an integral part of Britten’s operatic score.

However the *piece de resistance* comes with the music composed for Bottom and Flute who play the central roles of Pyramus and Thisbe. Britten recreates the world of Rossini and Donizetti’s 19<sup>th</sup> century bel canto style, with Flute being given a mad scene complete with solo flute accompaniment. Peter Pears originally performed this role, and between them, Britten and Pears created a parody of the Mad Scene from Donizetti’s opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which had earlier that year been a huge success in a new production directed by Franco Zeffereilli at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, launching the Australian soprano Dame Joan Sutherland in its title role, to overnight, international acclaim.

***“Now the hungry lion roars, and the wolf howls the moon”***  
**(Fairies) ... A Midsummer Night’s Dream**

The Fairies, the followers of Oberon and Tytania, are made up of a chorus of boys, their unbroken voices creating a sense of innocence, even though the text they interpret at certain

times is earthy and sexually suggestive. Britten loved composing for children, and in particular for boys' voices, and it is the fairies that introduce the element of music into the score. Britten composes a short solo chorus for the fairies set to Shakespeare's famous text "*You spotted snakes with double tongue*" and when Bottom, who professes to have a "*reasonable good ear in music*" asks to be entertained, it is the four solo fairies who serenade him, playing on recorders and woodblocks, Britten humorously adapting the tune of an old English children's song for them to play.

It is also the fairy world, which introduces dance into the opera. Once Oberon's victory is assured, he commands his Queen, to text sung on repeated notes associated with his spell, to call for music, and a fairy dance ensues. This dance is in the form of a sarabande, an ancient Spanish dance with a distinctive rhythm, which was popular during the Baroque period and would have been included in music composed by Henry Purcell. The mechanicals also perform a dance for Theseus and his court, however this far removed from the fairies stately sarabande, Britten being true to the characters of his "hard-handed men" and writing a crude rustic Bergamask, a dance, which originated by Italian peasants. Before Puck's farewell speech, which brings the opera to a close, Oberon, Tytania and the fairies in an exquisite ensemble, including dance, bless the court of Theseus, and the three pairs of lovers, the opera ending as it begun, with the magical fairy world.

***"So, goodnight unto you all.  
Give me your hands, if we be friends,  
And Robin shall restore amends"  
(Puck) ... A Midsummer Night's Dream***

## Houston Grand Opera's cast

**Theseus  
Hippolyta  
Hermia  
Lysander  
Helena  
Demetrius**

**Ryan McKinny  
Leann Sandel-Pantaleo  
Marie Lenormand  
Norman Reinhardt  
Katie van Kooten  
Liam Bonner**

**Oberon  
Tytania  
Puck**

**Iestyn Davies  
Laura Claycomb  
Jon Michael Hill**

**Bottom  
Flute  
Peter Quince  
Snout  
Snug  
Starveling**

**Matthew Rose  
Steven Cole  
Robert Pomakov  
Jon Kolbet  
Adam Cioffari \*  
James J. Kee \***

**Conductor  
Director  
Sets and Costumes  
Lighting Designer**

**Patrick Summers  
Neil Armfield  
Dale Ferguson  
Damien Cooper**

**\* Member of HGO Studio**