

# OPERA

What you need to know before you go...

## **BLODWEN BACKSTAGE: STUDY GUIDE**

Three illustrated lectures on the history, content, and importance of *Blodwen* - the first Welsh opera.

Music: Dr. Joseph Parry (1841-1903)

Libretto: Richard Davies (1833-77)

New chamber version: Dulais Rhys (*Blodwen* Editor/Publisher and Guest Conductor)

**Performances: May 10/11 and 18/19\* at 7:30 P.M. (\*2 P.M. matinée), NOVA (Roebing Theater)**

### **Multiple firsts for Rimrock Opera Foundation, NOVA ... and Billings!**

DATES: April 2/9/16, 2019 (all Tuesdays)

TIME: 5:30-7:00 P.M. (1.5 hrs)

LOCATION: NOVA Center for the Performing Arts, 2317 Montana Avenue, Billings, MT 59101

#### *PRE-LECTURE RESEARCH!*

*As "homework," you may wish to research in more depth the answers to these questions 😊*

*During the lectures, I will give the answers and elaborate on these discussion points.*

#### *DRESS REHEARSAL*

*Class members are invited to attend: Wednesday, May 8, 2019 - 7:30 P.M. at NOVA*

### **LECTURE 1: Tuesday April 2, 2019 (5:30-7:00pm at NOVA)**

#### **WHY MULTIPLE FIRSTS?**

Rimrock Opera Foundation's production of *Blodwen* is a historic Welsh-American first:

- This will be the first staged performance of *Blodwen* in the USA
- This will be the first American company to produce an opera sung in Welsh
- This production will use Dulais Rhys's new chamber version of the orchestration

#### **WHAT IS DULAIS RHYS'S CONNECTION TO JOSEPH PARRY?**

During the 1970s, he was a music student at Bangor University in north Wales. After obtaining his bachelor's and master's degrees, he had the opportunity to research Parry's life and music, for which he was awarded his doctorate.

### WHY IS *Blodwen* IMPORTANT?

First performed in 1878, Wales's first opera is a milestone in the history of Welsh music. Parry estimated that it had been performed over 500 times by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – including selections from the opera that were performed in America.

### WHO IS THE COMPOSER?

Dr. Joseph Parry (1841-1903), was born in Wales and emigrated, with his family, to Danville, Pennsylvania, when he was twelve years old. As a musician, Parry rose to fame among immigrant Welsh communities and became well known and beloved on both sides of the Atlantic.

### WHERE IS WALES?

Roughly the size of New Jersey, Wales is the country immediately to the west of England and across the sea from Ireland. Around a dozen of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were of Welsh descent, including Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Robert Morris, Francis Lewis, and William Williams (these are common Welsh last names). In the arts, Wales has given the world the poet Dylan Thomas; singers Bryn Terfel, Tom Jones, Shirley Bassey; and actors Catherine Zeta Jones, Richard Burton, and Ray Milland.

### WHY DID PARRY COMPOSE *BLODWEN*?

Although Wales has a rich tradition of vocal, instrumental, and folk music, unlike Italy, opera was never a part of this history. In 1863 in Philadelphia, Parry saw his first opera: Beethoven's *Fidelio*, which inspired him to want to write an opera with Welsh words ... but he had to wait over a decade to make his dream come true.

### WHEN EXACTLY WAS *BLODWEN* WRITTEN?

Until my research into Parry's music revealed the actual date, various years of composition were quoted ... including 1880 - two years after the first performance! A manuscript in Parry's hand revealed the truth ... all will be revealed!

### WHAT IS THE PLOT OF THE OPERA?

*Blodwen* is a typical, Romantic Italian-style opera, and like many 19<sup>th</sup> century operas, the plot is somewhat illogical and of secondary importance to the music. *Blodwen* includes an interrupted wedding, lovers, dying heroes, and a dramatic final plot twist, where a character, thought to have died, reappears and is reunited with a family member! Apart from the last scene, which is set in Chester Castle, the action of *Blodwen* takes place in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century in and around *Castell Maelor* in the northeast of the country.

### ACT 1

We shall follow the plotline and hear excerpts of the music – recorded and/or performed live.

#### Glossary of Welsh words

*Castell* = castle   *Syr* = Sir   *Yr Wyddfa* = Snowdon (Wales's highest mountain)

Scene 1: It is the eve of the marriage of Elen, daughter of Lady Maelor, with the Welsh warrior Arthur of *Castell Berwyn*. News arrives that Syr Hywel Ddu and his beautiful, adopted daughter, Blodwen, will shortly be arriving. Lady Maelor is delighted that that they, and others, will attend and prays for peace and God's protection for Elen and Arthur. Servants sing of their joy as they decorate the castle with lilies and roses. Iolo the Bard proclaim peace on Lady Maelor, the castle, Elen, and Arthur. Blodwen and Hywel arrive and wish good luck to Elen. Blodwen laments that her mother is dead and her father lost in battle but is happy at being able to make her home in Hywel's castle: *Castell yr Wyddfa*. Lady Maelor assures her that she is welcome to stay in *Castell Maelor* because war is coming, and Hywel will be away fighting. Iolo predicts that the English king's power will be overturned.

Scene 2: Elen's wedding celebration is interrupted by the arrival of Plantagenet soldiers, who demand the keys of the castle in the name of King Henry of England. Lady Maelor and the chorus send them away with a defiant message for their master.

## **LECTURE 2: Tuesday April 9, 2019 (5:30-7:00 P.M. at NOVA)**

### **WHY IS JOSEPH PARRY ALSO CALLED *PENCERDD AMERICA*?**

*Gorsedd y Beirdd* (literally: seat of bards) is a unique, Welsh institution that honors people for their contribution to Welsh culture, the arts, public life, etc. During the acceptance ceremony, the honoree is given a "bardic name," usually reflecting the person's field of expertise or residence. Parry's bardic name *Pencerdd America* means "Principal Musician of America."

### **WHO WROTE THE *LIBRETTO*?**

Folk-poet Richard Davies (1833-77), more commonly known by his bardic name *Mynyddog*, was born into a rural, but cultured, family. His lightweight style was typical of mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Welsh poetry. Why Parry approached Davies to request an opera libretto is unknown, and taking into account the poet's lack of experience in this area, the end result turned out to be a commendable work of prose.

### **WHERE CAN I READ THE *LIBRETTO*?**

The online version of the libretto consists of the original Welsh text, a literal English translation, and two phonetic versions: 1. International Phonetic Alphabet (see below) 2. Editor's Phonetic Version (as found in the vocal score). <https://dulaisrhythmservices.com/assets/Blodwen/librettoMASTER-PRIF%20%20GOPIvi18.pdf>

### **WHAT HAPPENED AT THE FIRST PERFORMANCE OF *BLODWEN*?**

The 1878 premiere did not go to plan! Because this was the first time Welsh people had heard an opera, Parry first explained to the capacity audience what an opera was and that the singers – though in costume - would NOT be acting (considered a sin in 19<sup>th</sup>-century, puritan Wales). Nevertheless, with Parry's two young sons as accompanists and a cast of music students, the audience was so enthused that many sections of the opera had to be repeated – eventually resulting in Parry having to beg the audience to let the performance continue!

### **WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THE FIRST PERFORMANCE?**

The 1878 premiere was so successful that Parry decided to take the opera – along with his oratorio *Emmanuel* – on tour through Wales and also to London. But these performances, as well as publishing

the opera, were a financial disaster! Nevertheless, Parry went on to write 8 more operas, but none achieved the popularity of *Blodwen*.

#### WHAT IS “Hywel a Blodwen”?

Roughly translated as Hywel and Blodwen, this light-hearted love duet takes place during Act 2 and became an instant hit and a best-seller for Parry - it remains one of the Welsh people’s best-loved piece of music. Still performed today, “Hywel a Blodwen” is often the highlight of a concert and a much-anticipated number in a *Blodwen* performance, which is why YouTube has so many videos of the duet.

#### WHAT KIND OF LANGUAGE IS WELSH?

Welsh is a Brythonic Celtic language, and of Wales’s population of 3 million, around 30% speak it (the language of *Blodwen*) fluently ... including Dulais Rhys! The fluency of the remainder of the population varies, depending on age, education, locality, family tradition, etc. Buckle up for a five minute mandatory, non-optional, compulsory, doors-are-locked Welsh language lesson.

#### ACT 2

We shall follow the plotline and hear excerpts of the music – recorded and/or performed live.

Scene 1: At dawn at *Castell Maelor*, huntsmen leave for the chase. Iolo sings of the dreadful portents to be seen in the stars. Hywel appears and sings of his love for Blodwen (who is out of sight), and she responds that she is in love with him. In the famous duet “Hywel a Blodwen” that follows, she teases him he has not gone hunting. The huntsmen return, but their joy is interrupted by a messenger from the Prince of Wales, who asks for the men of Maelor to defend their country and prepare immediately for battle with Henry’s forces.

Scene 2: Inside *Castell Maelor*, Hywel and Arthur sing a rousing duet as they prepare for battle. Elen and Blodwen take leave of the warriors, each pinning a white ribbon on their lover’s breast.

Scene 3: In Lady Maelor’s chamber, a messenger describes the ferocity of the battle and the exceptional bravery of Hywel and Arthur. She calls on Iolo to foretell the outcome of the battle. He replies that disaster is at hand and that she should comfort and support Elen and Blodwen.

#### **LECTURE 3: Tuesday April 16, 2019 (5:30-7:00 P.M. at NOVA)**

##### WHAT IS A CHAMBER VERSION OF AN OPERA?

Putting on an opera is expensive ... ask any producer! Often, a high percentage of the costs is employing a full orchestra (usually 30-40 players). A chamber version – also called an orchestral reduction – reduces the number of instrumentalists needed, which decreases production costs and also makes it possible for the opera to be performed in a smaller theater.

##### WHAT DOES PARRY SAY ABOUT *BLODWEN* IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

The composer’s autobiography, completed in only 3 months in 1902, is an uneven mix of childhood memories, performance experiences, and important – as well as trivial – events. For such a historic

work, *Blodwen* is only mentioned in passing, but Parry regrets publishing the work from his own pocket: “A dreadful blow to my empty bank!”

#### WHY DOES *BLODWEN* INCLUDE WELSH FOLK MUSIC?

Folk music – instrumental and vocal – plays an important role in every nation’s culture, and Wales is no exception. Parry would have been raised with traditional music, and in *Blodwen*, he skillfully combines folk melodies with his own music. In addition, he also includes a form of folk music that is unique to Wales, called *cerdd dant* ... to be explained!

#### HOW DOES A NON-WELSH-SPEAKING SINGER LEARN A ROLE?

When professional singers need to sing in an “obscure” language, they often use International Phonetic Alphabet (I.P.A.), which gives the sound of each letter. Fortunately for non-Welsh-speakers, Welsh (unlike English or French) is almost totally phonetic, meaning most letters only have one sound, so singing in Welsh is (should be) relatively easy.

#### WHAT IS A SOL-FA VERSION OF THE MUSIC?

Also known as *solfege*, this alternate method of music notation is very different to the more familiar (traditional) method of writing music on 5 lines. For older generations of musicians in certain parts of the world (such as my parents), sol-fa was their first and preferred musical notation ... all will be explained!

#### WHAT IS *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*?

Wales’s national anthem (translated as “The Ancient Land of my Fathers”) is often played - and always sung *con gusto* - at the beginning of sports events and at musical performances such as concerts and operas.

#### HOW IMPORTANT IS PARRY AS A COMPOSER?

Today, Joseph Parry is little known outside of Wales and communities of Welsh descent worldwide. At the height of his fame, he was one of the most famous of all 19<sup>th</sup>-century Welshmen. Besides *Blodwen*, his hymn-tune *Aberystwyth* (the Welsh town where he was professor of music) is still sung today, and his *Myfanwy* for male voices remains popular (as sung by the Welsh coal miners in the Oscar-winning 1941 movie *How Green Was my Valley*).

#### HOW ORIGINAL IS PARRY AS A COMPOSER?

The music of a few composers, such as Tchaikovsky, Sibelius, and Fauré, has a unique sound. The style of most other composers is eclectic (borrowing from others) to a certain degree. However, what about Parry? How original is his compositional style? All will be revealed ...

#### WHY WAS THERE A 1978 PERFORMANCE?

To celebrate the centenary of the 1878 premiere, *Gwyl Gerdd Menai* [a north Wales music festival] wanted to perform *Blodwen*. The composer’s original orchestral score was deemed inappropriate for modern ears, so Dulais Rhys - as a Parry research student - prepared a new orchestral version. The

performance was broadcast live on the BBC and subsequently released as a recording by Welsh company *SAIN* records.

### ACT 3

We shall follow the plotline and hear excerpts of the music – recorded and/or performed live.

Scene 1: In *Castell Maelor*, Arthur, mortally wounded, sings a last farewell to Elen, and the scene closes with a choral funeral procession.

Scene 2: A messenger tells Lady Maelor of the defeat of the Welsh army and the death of many of its leaders. Hywel was one of the bravest warriors, but the messenger does not know whether he is still alive. Blodwen then calls on “heaven’s breezes” to bring her news and sings of the loss of her parents, brother, and now possibly of Hywel. Iolo brings news that Hywel has been captured and is in Chester Castle awaiting execution.

Scene 3: In Chester Castle jail, the Welsh prisoners sing a defiant chorus. Lady Maelor, Blodwen, and Iolo have been allowed into Hywel’s cell to see him for the last time, and he sings a final farewell to Blodwen. Outside, a crowd is heard celebrating the English victory. A stranger appears at the cell door and Iolo demands that he reveals his identity. The stranger is Rhys Gwyn, Blodwen’s father, thought to have been killed twenty years before. Father and daughter reunite as Rhys Gwyn announces good news: the king is dead, and he brings a command from the court that all prisoners are to be set free. During the closing chorus of rejoicing, Parry weaves into his music the well-known traditional march “Men of Harlech.”

**We hope you will enjoy this “backstage” tour of *Blodwen* - thank you for attending.  
Then please come to the 5/8 Dress Rehearsal (7 P.M. N.B.) ... as well as a  
performance – but, please, no singing along 😊**