

Synopsis of the first Welsh opera

Blodwen

Music: Joseph Parry (*Pencerdd America*) 1841-1903

Libretto: Richard Davies (*Mynyddog*) 1833-1877

First performance: 21 May 1878, Aberystwyth, Wales

GLOSSARY

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

Apart from the last scene, which is set in Chester Castle, the action of *Blodwen* takes place in 14th century Wales, in and around *Castell Maelor* in the north-east of the country.

ACT 1

Scene 1: The opera opens on 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 sings of her pleasure that they, and others, are coming to the wedding and prays for peace and God's protection for Elen and Arthur. A chorus of servants sings of their joy as they decorate the castle walls and Elen's chamber with lilies and roses. Iolo the Bard proclaims peace on Lady Maelor and the castle and blesses Elen and Arthur. Blodwen and Hywel arrive; they sing greetings and wish good luck to Elen. Blodwen laments that her mother is dead and her father lost in battle but expresses her happiness at being able to make her home in Hywel's castle: *Castell yr Wyddfa*. Lady Maelor sings of Blodwen's father's bravery and assures her that she is welcome to stay in *Castell Maelor*; Hywel urges her to stay because he fears war is coming and he will be away fighting. Iolo predicts that the English king's power will be overturned and that 'a morning star of better times is rising in the east'.

Scene 2: Elen's wedding celebration is interrupted by the arrival of three Plantagenet soldiers, who demand the keys of the castle in the name of King Henry¹ of England. Lady Maelor and the chorus send them away with a defiant message for their master.

¹often known as 'Harry' and called *Harri* in the Welsh libretto

ACT 2

Scene 1: At dawn in front of *Castell Maelor*, huntsmen sing as they leave for the chase. Iolo then appears, singing of the dreadful portents to be seen in the stars. Hywel next appears and sings of his love for Blodwen (who is out of sight) in one of best-known arias in the opera. She responds that she is in love with him and, making herself known, teases Hywel that he has not gone hunting. The following short love duet² remains one of Wales's most beloved pieces of music. 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 Harry's forces.

²colloquially known as 'Hywel a Blodwen' and a Parry best-seller

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 of them pinning a white ribbon on their lover's breast.

Scene 3: In Lady Maelor's chamber, a messenger arrives and 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.

ACT 3

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

Scene 2: A messenger arrives to tell 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 'the mountain breezes' to bring her news and sings of the loss of her parents, brother and now possibly of Hywel. Iolo then arrives, bringing the news that Hywel has been captured and is in Chester Castle awaiting execution.

Scene 3: The final scene takes place in Chester Castle jail, where 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. Hywel sings a song of farewell to Blodwen, an aria that remains a favorite with Welsh tenors to this day. A crowd outside the castle walls is heard celebrating the English victory. A stranger appears at the cell door and Iolo demands that he reveals his identity. The stranger is none other than 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, as a consequence, he has been released from captivity and brings a command from the court that all prisoners are to be set free. The opera closes with a chorus of rejoicing, during which Parry weaves into his music the well-known traditional march 'Men of Harlech'.