

A Midsummer Night's Dream premièred in 1960 at Jubilee Hall, Aldeburgh

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913-1976)

Libretto by Peter Pears and the Composer after the Shakespearean play

Running time: 156 minutes

Performed at Glyndebourne in 1981 (with the London Philharmonic)

Oberon, King of the Fairies	James Bowman	<i>Countertenor</i>
Tytania, Queen of the Fairies	Ileana Cotrubas	<i>Soprano</i>
Puck (an Acrobat)	Damien Nash	<i>Spoken</i>
Theseus, Duke of Athens	Lieuwe Visser	<i>Bass</i>
Hippolyta, betrothed to Theseus	Claire Powell	<i>Contralto</i>
Lysander	Ryland Davies	<i>Tenor</i>
Hermia, in love with Lysander	Cynthia Buchan	<i>Mezzo</i>
Demetrius	Dale Duesing	<i>Baritone</i>
Helena, in love with Demetrius	Felicity Lott	<i>Soprano</i>

Bottom, a Weaver	Curt Appelgren	<i>Bass-Baritone</i>
Quince, a Carpenter	Robert Bryson	<i>Bass</i>
Flute, a Bellows-Maker	Patrick Power	<i>Tenor</i>
Snug, a Joiner	Andrew Gallagher	<i>Bass</i>
Snout, a Tinker	Adrian Thompson	<i>Tenor</i>
Starveling, a Tailor	Donald Bell	<i>Baritone</i>
Cobweb, Peaseblossom, Mustardseed and Moth	[Fairies]	<i>Treble</i>

Conductor	<i>Bernard Haitink</i>
Stage Director	<i>Peter Hall</i>
Stage Designer	<i>John Bury</i>

Synopsis

ACT 1: The wood, deepening twilight. Oberon has quarrelled with Tytania because he wants her attendant, a 'lovely boy' who's been stolen from an Indian king. Tytania defies him. In revenge Oberon orders Puck to fetch him a herb: the juice sprinkled on sleeping human eyelids will act as a love potion.

Hermia has been ordered by her father to marry Demetrius. She plans to flee with her preferred spouse Lysander, away from Athens where her father's ruling won't apply. Demetrius and Helena enter just after the first couple leave. Demetrius tells Helena that he doesn't love her. He's searching for Lysander and Hermia: 'The one I'll slay, the other slayeth me.'

Puck returns with the herb. Oberon – who's been eavesdropping – reveals his plan for Tytania, and orders Puck to find Demetrius (with his recognisable Athenian clothes), and anoint his eyelids when he's sure that Demetrius will see Helena when he wakes up.

The rustics arrive to rehearse *Pyramus and Thisbe* a play that will be performed when Duke Theseus marries Hippolyta. After allocating parts, they agree to rehearse later.

Lysander and Hermia settle down to sleep after getting lost. Puck sprinkles Lysander's eyelids with juice. When Helena and Demetrius arrive, Helena awakens Lysander who declares his love for her, and follows her. Hermia subsequently wakes up alone, and goes to look for Lysander.

Tytania and her retinue arrive. When she's asleep, Oberon squeezes juice on her eyelids.

ACT 2: The wood, dark night. The rustics arrive for their rehearsal. Bottom leaves the clearing, and returns wearing an ass's head. Tytania awakes and falls in love with him. When Hermia and Demetrius return, it's obvious that Puck has bewitched the wrong man.

Oberon orders him to search for Helena. As Demetrius lies down to sleep, juice is squeezed on his closed eyes by Oberon. While Lysander is protesting his sincerity to Helena, Demetrius wakes. When he also declares a passion for Helena, she believes that everyone is playing a joke on her.

Hermia returns and the two women, formerly close friends, mock and insult each other. Oberon orders Puck to lead the four astray in the wood, as well as putting juice on Lysander's eyelids to restore the status quo.

[Interval]

ACT 3 SCENE 1: The wood, early next morning. Now that Oberon has acquired a boy attendant, he frees Tytania and Bottom from the spell. Bottom rejoins his companions. The four lovers awake, and are reconciled: Lysander with Hermia, and Demetrius with Helena.

ACT 3 SCENE 2: Theseus' palace. The Duke tells Hermia that he'll overrule her father, and allow her to marry Lysander. The rustics' play is enacted, after which both couples retire. The fairies and Puck occupy the room. Oberon and Tytania enter and sing with the fairies. They vacate the stage for Puck, who delivers his parting message to the audience.

***A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Britten**

In 1959 Britten wanted to write a new opera to celebrate improvements at Aldeburgh's Jubilee Hall. [Before this date the hall had only been used for one short children's opera première. Ironically Britten's only subsequent Suffolk opera premières were three church parables at Orford Church, plus his 1973 *Death in Venice* at the Snape Maltings.]

In the short time available, he and Pears adapted Shakespeare's play, instead of commissioning a libretto. About half the play is cut, the action is simplified, and some lines are reallocated. Britten believed this rationalisation was essential, and was confident that 'the original Shakespeare will survive.' Despite some illness, the whole project was completed in seven months.

A Midsummer Night's Dream includes elements that Britten found congenial: night and sleep; marvellous lyric poetry; and the juxtaposition of natural and supernatural, with a rich display of musical parody. Fairies, lovers and rustics all have their own sound world with distinctive instrumentation. Harps, celesta, harpsichord and percussion are used for the acerbic music of the fairies. Strings and woodwind characterise the lovers; while bassoon and deep brass are allocated

to the rustics. Other inspirations contribute to the opera's success: the spoken role of Puck, accompanied by trumpet and drums. Oberon is assigned to a counter-tenor, an other-worldly sound that is beguiling as well as sinister.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of Britten's most melodious scores. Oberon's 'I know a bank where the wild thyme blows' is one Act 1 highlight, together with the love music for Tytania and Bottom in the following Act. The rustics' play is a carefully organised opera buffa, notable for the way that Italian opera is parodied.



The magic of the wood permeates the whole opera, for example slow portamento sighs and glissandi to illustrate creaking branches and rustling leaves. Major triads depicting the woodland mark Britten's unusual step towards serial composition: use of all twelve chromatic notes to create tonal ambiguity. All the fairies combine to provide a magical haunting climax: 'Now until the break of day, through this house each fairy stray'. Britten has created a Shakespearean opera to rank with Verdi's masterpieces.

"I just wish Ben had been here tonight" 100 Glyndebourne Performances in 44 Years!

Director Peter Hall's iconic staging of Benjamin Britten's opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream* premièred at the Glyndebourne Festival on 21 June 1981. In Peter Hall's remarkable staging, the wood comes alive, as logs and trees move and rustle creating ambiguous silhouettes in the dark mysterious woodland, lit only by designer John Bury's wonderful rising sun and moon. With its magical, breathing woodland set and eerie fairy realm, it became a much-loved classic, passing 100 performances during its milestone revival in late 2025.

<https://bachtrack.com/review-midsummer-nights-dream-hall-mead-redpath-stasevska-glyndebourne-july-2023>

Sir Peter Hall's production of Britten's opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is older than most of the cast in this summer's Glyndebourne Festival revival. Countertenor Tim Mead (Oberon) was barely a month old when the staging premiered on 1st July 1981. Britten had died only five years earlier. His partner, Peter Pears (who created the role of Flute), said at the opening night, "I just wish Ben had been here tonight..." There's a reason this production became a fixture: it's a classic production of an opera, ideal for this idyllic festival.

Where Shakespeare opens his play in the Athenian court, Britten and Pears (who together adapted the Bard to shape their libretto) plunge the audience straight into the woods at night. The sinister

nocturnal atmosphere that permeates Hall's production, here revived by Lynne Hockney, who created the original choreography. John Bury's set is literally alive. As the orchestra awakens from its slumber, double basses sigh queasy glissandos, harp and percussion prick the senses, leaves rustle, branches creak, trees glide across the black lacquered flooring, manipulated by black-clad stagehands. There's a constant feeling of being watched, under fairy surveillance.

The Tudorbethan costumes still dazzle, the fairies unsettling in their ruffs and spiky wigs, Oberon and Tytania in stiff rebato collars and towering hairpieces. Paul Pyant's lighting bathes the stylised fairyland in silvery moonbeams.



One of the liveliest characterisations came from the pit, where Dalia Stasevska conducted the London Philharmonic Orchestra in a terrific account of Britten's brilliant score, vividly conjuring up all the danger lurking in the woods, harp and percussion providing shards of moonlight. "Out of this wood do not desire to go!" In such a seductive orchestral rendition, it was tempting to stay there all night.

from July 2023 [the revival month that Cathy and I were privileged to attend]

Selected Musical Biography

OBERON: JAMES BOWMAN CBE (1941–2023) was arguably, after Alfred Deller, the most important countertenor in the 20th century revival of his voice type. Britten wrote the role of Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* specially for Deller. Selection by Britten himself transformed Bowman's career in 1967, bringing a larger voice to this role, as well as a more theatrical and commanding stage presence. Bowman had joined David Munrow's Early Music Consort in 1965, which became a focus of his Concert career. The suicide of David Munrow in 1976 left Bowman in such a state of shock that he lost his voice, and had to retrain.

HELENA: DAME FELICITY LOTT (1947–2026) was an English soprano, and among the leading voices in operas by Mozart, Richard Strauss and Offenbach. She performed with the Glyndebourne company from 1976 to 1990, returning in 1998 and 2002. 'Flott' also had a special love for French mélodies, German lieder and English art songs. To perform less familiar repertoire she founded *The Songmakers' Almanac* in 1976 (with three other soloists, plus Graham Johnson her accompanist from student days).

STAGE DIRECTOR: SIR PETER HALL (1930–2017) was an English theatre, opera and film director. On his death, a Royal National Theatre statement declared that Hall's "influence on the artistic life of Britain in the 20th century was unparalleled". Hall founded and directed the Royal Shakespeare

Company (1960-68). He was director of the National Theatre (1973–88), and artistic director of Glyndebourne Festival Opera (1984–1990). Hall worked at many of the world's leading Opera houses including Covent Garden, Bayreuth and more than 20 Glyndebourne productions (several with Janet Baker).

CONDUCTOR: BERNARD HAITINCK CH KBE was a Dutch conductor (and violinist). He conducted several international orchestras, and opera companies: the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Glyndebourne Opera, the Royal Opera House, the Staatskapelle Dresden, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The focus of his prolific recording was classical symphonies, orchestral works, as well as operas. He conducted 90 Promenade concerts in London.

Benjamin Britten's Operas

Britten was the first British-born composer for 300 years who was primarily an opera composer. The 1945 première of *Peter Grimes* is generally regarded as a watershed in British music. Within three years it had been performed in many major opera houses, including Milan and in America (conducted by Bernstein). As his original 'operetta' *Paul Bunyan* had attracted little attention, it seemed particularly astonishing that Britten should have created an opera that was so stageworthy, and that he demonstrated such dramatic and theatrical flair.

Britten's immediate operatic future lay away from large London theatres. The *Rape of Lucretia* was first performed at Glyndebourne in 1946. *Albert Herring*, another chamber opera, followed a year later. By then a provincial tour of *The Rape of Lucretia* had been a financial disaster. Although the Glyndebourne owner John Christie agreed to underwrite this loss, he wasn't prepared to subsidise any comparable venture.

The English Opera Group was launched early in 1947 with Britten, Eric Crozier and John Piper as artistic directors. Touring again proved costly, so Britten, Piers and Crozier founded a 1948 festival at Aldeburgh where they lived. Many of Britten's works were written specifically for this festival, though it transpired that Britten's next three major Operas were not written for Aldeburgh.

Billy Budd was written for the 1951 Festival of Britain at Covent Garden: a return to a nautical theme, as well as the larger forces associated with *Peter Grimes*. With a grim story and an all-male cast, it was several decades before this became a popular success. *Gloriana* was commissioned by Covent Garden for the 1953 Coronation of Elizabeth II. This too was a relative failure, following first night criticism about the suitability and treatment of the regal subject matter.

Wounded, Britten returned to chamber opera and composed *The Turn of the Screw* – based on Henry James' ghost story – for the Venice Biennale in 1954. In 1956 Britten visited Bali, where he was profoundly impressed by the sounds of the gamelan. Henceforth exotic Eastern sounds became a feature of his orchestration (though this wasn't particularly conspicuous in his 1957 *Noye's Fludde*). This has been described as Britten's most lovable work. He specified that ten professional instrumentalists should ideally be supplemented by 57 amateur players!

Memories of the gamelan lend a supernatural glitter to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but these find full expression in three church parables: *Curlew River*, *The Burning Fiery Furnace* and *The Prodigal Son*, which were composed between 1964 and 1968. Another relevant Asian influence was Britten's discovery of Japanese Noh plays, which occurred one month after his visit to Bali.

Britten's lifelong pacifism was conspicuous during WW2: less than two years before Pearl Harbor, his pacifist *Sinfonia da Requiem* was rejected as an unacceptable response to a commission from the Japanese Government. His 1962 *War Requiem* was the largest scale work composed after he passed the age of 45. Fuelled by the Vietnam War, he returned to Henry James in 1971: *Owen Wingrave* was originally written as a television opera, but soon transferred to Covent Garden.

His last opera was composed hurriedly, after the need for heart surgery had been diagnosed. *Death in Venice* (1973) based on a Thomas Mann novella was Britten's only Opera premièred at Snape Maltings, though he was too ill to attend rehearsals and the first performance.