

The making of a mummers opera

This paper is about the making of an opera based on a mummers play. The circumstances that led to the opera being written all started when Ian Gilchrist saw the Marshfield Mummers. As a result of this he created the Widcombe Mummers and only six months later on New Year's Day I found myself playing in a marching band accompanying their first performance. Coincidentally, I am studying part-time for a BA in music at Bath Spa University and found that the choice of modules for my second year only allowed me to do performance, music theatre or opera, none of which I wanted to do. Charles Wiffen, Head of the Music Department at the University, suggested I could follow the opera module but write a short opera instead of performing in one. Nick Atkinson, a composition tutor, had the idea that I might base it on a mummers play. I used the script of the Widcombe Mummers' St George's day play which I liked because it had a dragon in it. I also liked the fact that the only fighting that goes on is with a dragon that *needs* to be destroyed because he's going around eating people. There are no pointless fights between two knights! The text of the play (which became the libretto) has three layers to it; a cobbling together of traditional mummers plays; all the extra lines that have been subsequently added by various members of Widcombe Mummers and finally the extra text that was added by me as composer.

The basic story of the opera is that the King of Egypt's daughter is in Turkeyland, there's a dragon on the loose and her father has offered her hand in marriage to any man who can kill the dragon. Saint George comes along but while he's dithering around just thinking about it, Bold Slasher gets in first, fights with the dragon but gets killed. Saint George then has a go and we all know how that ends up - he gets the girl and calls the doctor to bring the dead knight and dragon back to life – but only after the dragon has promised not to eat any more maidens. I had one good idea which I added after most of the work was finished. I had seen mummers plays in which the doctor pulled a string of sausages or intestines out of the dead knight so it occurred to me that he could pull a string of maidens out of the dragon. My partner Chris then bought me seven Barbie dolls in ones and twos from EBay. One of the sellers expressed her hope that our little girl would enjoy playing with the doll but we hadn't the heart to tell her what was really going to happen to Barbie!

So the opera *'Make Room for Mummers'* is based on the Widcombe Mummers' St George's day play. All the dialogue is sung, not spoken. The entire performance lasts about 45 minutes. It is scored for seven singers and eleven musicians. The seven characters are St George; the King of Egypt's Daughter; Bold Slasher; Doctor Spinney; the Dragon; King Bladud (who, legend has it,

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founded the city of Bath); and Queen Bladud. There are five movements plus the introductory music and finale. The instrumentation is for two violins, viola, cello, two flutes (one doubling piccolo), clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, horn and percussion (including duck call) and a conductor keeps the band and singers together. For the sake of simplicity - and in order to keep it in line with the tradition of the mummers play - no scenery is used.



Mummers Opera – extracting Barbie © Anne Gregson

I began to compose the work by setting the text to music without any accompaniment. At first I just followed the rise and fall of the human voice as I thought it might sound if the play was being acted. The result was far more melodious than I expected it to be. I wanted the recitative to be more melodic than in most opera and I think I have proved that there is no reason why the entire dialogue should not be melodic. I arranged for David Cohen, a member of the Widcombe Mummers who is interested in opera, to go through it with me and advise me. He suggested that I could add as much of my own text as I liked to it and give the various characters songs, or arias, to sing. Although much of the text is my own, I have added to the original text rather than modifying it, and have used

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all except a couple of sentences of the original text. Some of the songs are entirely my own words. All of the music is my own. Although none of the tunes are actually traditional most of them are in a style which owes a lot to English folk song and has an old English style that fits in with the mummers theme and also gives the appropriate atmosphere. Nick Atkinson at the university tutored me regarding the music, and I think it may have been both David Cohen of Widcombe Mummers and Nick Atkinson who suggested that I could have the same tunes coming up later in the opera to give structure and also a welcome feeling of familiarity for people hearing the tunes for the first time.

At first I intended the opera to be performed entirely by music students (thinking - 'let's get these young people involved with folk music') and thought it would be a great idea to give them the experience of performing at a folk festival so I contacted Bob Berry and arranged for us to perform it at Chippenham Folk Festival. Bob said that I must give the company a name to put in the festival programme, so we called ourselves the Fiery Dragon Folk Opera Company. I also arranged for us to perform at the University as part of Bath Fringe Festival.

I used a lot of harmonies in the score and often had the instruments doubling the singers to help them find their part, which is a technique used in West Gallery music so I knew it was likely to work well, and so it did. Nick, the composition tutor, had encouraged me to use what he described as orchestral colour which means little groups of instruments coming in and out, taking turns. The downside of this approach is a lot of bar counting for the band members but the students were used to that. The result musically is lovely.

By now the opera clearly needed a conductor so I approached a student who I had heard was interested in conducting. She turned out to be my greatest asset as she was thoroughly committed, even when she was exhausted with all her other university work, and without her the performances could never have happened. She's now studying for an MA in conducting. I then invited students to take part as singers and band members. Unfortunately some of the students turned out to be unreliable and did not always turn up for rehearsals. The two female singers both decided to drop out with less than six weeks to go to the first performance. Luckily one of the other singers knew a professional opera singer who was in a position to do it and she in turn found me another classical singer for the other part. They were both fabulous. In the end we had two singers from the music department, one from another course at the university, one from the music department of Liverpool University and two further opera singers and a folk singer from outside the university. The band

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had three players from outside and the rest of the band and the conductor were all music students. Instead of performing a specified role I held myself back to be understudy for all parts in case one of the singers was ill on the day of a performance. I did not need to do as much directing as I expected to because the performers were so able to improvise and come up with good ideas.

To begin with I produced what I called the 'vocal score' containing the parts for all the singers plus any instrumental sections between songs. Later on, when I was sure we had the final version; I gave each singer the full conductors' score which was 130 pages long. I also divided the score into movements, which helped everyone find their way round more easily and allowed me to only print out one movement every time I made an alteration. One of the most difficult tasks was providing each of the 11 musicians with their part. I had to adjust the page turns for each instrument so that they could turn the page when they weren't playing. I also had to put in cues for each instrument, where the score shows in tiny score what the most important instrument is playing just before they come in. Luckily I'd done an exercise in orchestration the previous year which taught me about this. I told the musicians that as I had never played in an orchestra they would have to advise me and I learned a lot from them.

We rehearsed on the university premises. At first we had the band and singers rehearsing separately. I sang the vocal line as the band rehearsed. I began to get an idea of what it was going to sound like and how this sound was different from playing it to myself on Sibelius.¹ It was quite different but not at all disappointing in that it had much more life. Finally we put the band and singers together. That was a very exciting moment for me as I could finally get an idea what it was going to sound like. It was really uplifting for me. I'd never done anything like this before, and it worked!

The costumes we used were mostly borrowed from the Widcombe Mummings, although we borrowed a crown from Bathampton Mummings and bought a few additional items. We had to decide how to disguise the singers as mummings usually achieve this by 'blacking up' or wearing rags over their faces. We decided masks would be appropriate because they are quick to put on when compared with make-up. Chris made masks for all the singers using bought-in basic masks on which we could elaborate as required. Some masks were simple and only needed jewels adding. The doctor's was a white full face mask cut down to an interesting shape and the dragon's was built up elaborately with layers of papier-mache, painted and decorated with jewels. We had to make sure the mask did not obscure the mouth so that it did not interfere with hearing the singer's voice. We

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would have liked to have borrowed the Widcombe Mummings beautiful and huge dragon costume but it just wasn't practical.



Mummings Opera – The Combat ©Anne Gregson

The opera begins with a solo violinist playing a lively tune in the style of a folk dance. The whole band join in a repeat of the tune during which time the characters process down the aisle from the back of the theatre. The cast then file onto the stage and form a semi-circle. During the whole performance the singers never leave the stage but just fall back into the semi-circle when they are not performing. This enables the singers to form the chorus and be constantly on hand to sing in harmony when required. It also keeps the opera in line with the mummings play that it was based on and close to the way the Widcombe Mummings performed it. The opera ends with the band playing the same tune, without the solo, and the cast file off the stage to the back of the theatre again.

So far there have been two performances, both in June 2012, one at the Cause Centre in Chippenham as part of Chippenham Folk Festival and one at the Michael Tippett Centre at Bath Spa University as part of Bath Fringe Festival. Both were well attended and well received. For the Bath Fringe Festival performance a student-led choir sang for the first half of the evening with the opera performed after the interval. The opera received a 4 star review in Venue, the local listings magazine for Bristol and Bath.

We produced a programme and put the words to the main choruses on the back and made it clear

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that the audiences were encouraged to join in. This worked particularly well for the Chippenham Folk Festival audience who managed to join in with gusto even though none of them had ever heard any of the songs before. The folk festival audience tittered when they saw the conductor and first violinist shake hands before the start, presumably because they weren't expecting to see that kind of formality at a folk festival. I had not discussed this with the performers but they are classical music students and did what they had been trained to do.

Despite all the difficulties I believe the opera was a great success and as a result I feel a great sense of achievement. It has also taught me a great deal about putting on a performance of this kind, and what is needed by the singers, band and conductor. I feel that I have proved that opera form can work with a mummings play and that the form can appeal to a folk festival or arts festival audience. It is also likely that the opera will have brought the tradition of mumming to the attention of people who may not have come across it. We intend to continue with the Fiery Dragon Folk Opera Company as an independent venture to take the opera around folk festivals and arts festivals in the future. We've been invited to perform at Bath Folk Festival in the summer of 2013. As I have now got a taste for writing 'folkie operas' I intend to write more pieces for the company in future.

¹ Sibelius is a compositional software programme.