Britten
Gloriana
First performance

mpLIVE

Benjamin Britten 1913–1976
Gloriana
Libretto by William Plomer

Queen Elizabeth	**Joan Cross**
Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex	**Peter Pears**
Frances, Countess of Essex	**Monica Sinclair**
Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy	**Geraint Evans**
Penelope (Lady Rich), sister to Essex	**Jennifer Vyvyan**
Sir Robert Cecil, Secretary of the Council	**Arnold Matters**
Sir Walter Raleigh, Captain of the Guard	**Frederick Dalberg**
Henry Cuffe, a satellite of Essex	**Ronald Lewis**
A Lady-in-Waiting	**Adele Leigh**
A blind ballad singer	**Inia Te Wiata**
The Recorder of Norwich	**Marian Nowakowski**
A housewife	**Edith Coates**
The spirit of the masque	**William McAlpine**
Master of Ceremonies	**David Tree**
City Crier	**Rydderch Davies**
Sir John Harrington	**Leonard Law**
The French Ambassador	**Ronald Thermiger**

The Royal Opera Chorus *chorus master* Douglas Robinson
The Orchestra of The Royal Opera House *leader* Charles Taylor
Sir John Pritchard
First performance, 8 June 1953, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

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	CD 1	**72’07**
1	Opening announcement	1’00
2	Prelude	2’22
3	Act one, scene one	18’18
4	Act one, scene two	23’28
5	Act two, scene one	17’26
6	Act two, scene two	9’28

	CD 2	**79’44**
1	Act two, scene three	23’39
2	Act three, scene one	19’42
3	Act three, scene two	10’20
4	Act three, scene three	24’42
5	Closing announcement	1’17

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The first performance of Britten's Gloriana

Arnold Whittall

The Occasion

The première performance of *Gloriana*, on 8 June 1953, came just 13 months after Britten and his librettist William Plomer had first discussed the project, within weeks of the death of King George VI which brought his 26-year-old elder daughter to the throne. The idea that an opera by Britten should be part of the celebrations surrounding the Coronation of Elizabeth II on 2 June 1953 stemmed from the Queen's arts-administrator cousin Lord Harewood, a friend of Britten's since the mid-1940s (who later became editor of Kobbé's Opera Book and donated to Music Preserved his valuable collection of broadcast performances, including this performance). Britten's previous opera *Billy Budd* had been premièred at Covent Garden as recently as December 1951, and his ability to work under pressure and still produce strikingly effective results was not in question. No other living British composer, whether a more senior figure like Ralph Vaughan Williams or Arnold Bax (then Master of the Queen's Music), or fairly close contemporaries like William Walton or Michael Tippett, was as likely to deliver the goods. At the same time, however, the subject-matter of *Billy Budd*, especially when considered alongside that of Britten's great early success *Peter Grimes* (1945), might have indicated to the commissioners that an opera by him could never be a straightforward and heart-warming celebration of establishment values. Vulnerability and aggressiveness under pressure were Britten's habitual themes: for all its ceremonial significance, *Gloriana* would be no exception, and what was generally accepted to have been the less-than-ecstatic response of the gala audience in Covent Garden on that first night soon became the stuff of theatrical legend, much of it tinged with a degree of malice at the idea of classical music's Golden Boy coming a cropper – and on a particularly high-profile occasion.

Precedents and Contexts

Monarchs in torment had been represented in opera before – Verdi's *Don Carlos* and Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* are two of the most renowned examples. Nor did one need to look beyond Shakespeare for the powerful theatrical depiction of the human failings of kings and queens. Neither the subject-matter nor the treatment of it in *Gloriana* were entirely unprecedented, or historically inaccurate: and yet paying homage to a young Queen by means of a portrait of the decline of her illustrious predecessor Elizabeth I risked seeming – for some at least – inappropriate for this particular occasion. It was not the time to observe, as Plomer's libretto has it in Act 2 Scene 2, 'The Queen is old, and time will steal/Sceptre and orb from out her hand'.

That the opera was judged successful when its specific association with the Coronation celebrations became less salient is indicated by the enthusiasm greeting later performances in the first run, not to mention its various later revivals. And even on the first night, as this recording attests, what sounds like tentative applause at the end of Act 1 had become a good deal warmer by the end. Although, as comments in the press make clear, the mixed response to the first night was not solely that of members of the gala audience who might have been more accustomed to the less challenging pleasures of Edward German's operetta *Merrie England*, the overall verdict of critics and professional commentators was far from uniformly hostile.

From Text to Music

Librettist William Plomer (1903–73) had made his reputation before the Second World War as a poet and novelist within the orbit of the Bloomsbury Group. Britten had probably met him as far back as 1937, and from 1948 onwards he had become a regular participant in the annual Aldeburgh Festival. The librettists of *Billy Budd*, E.M. Forster and Eric Crozier, had worked with Plomer's edition of the

Melville novel, and late in 1951 Britten had begun discussions with Plomer about an operatic collaboration – first on a version of Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Mr Tod*; then, when copyright problems put paid to that, on an original science-fiction subject, *Tyco the Vegan*. In February 1952 Britten actually had drafts of this *Tyco* material with him on a skiing holiday in Austria with Peter Pears and Lord Harewood during which Harewood's idea of a Britten opera to mark the birth of a new Elizabethan age was first discussed. It was also Harewood who suggested Lytton Strachey's Freud-influenced *Elizabeth and Essex* as a basis for the libretto, and at least one of Britten's biographers has argued that the composer seized on this because he saw himself – not unlike Elizabeth I – as a prominent figure under constant stress. He was also, the argument goes, no less likely than the Tudor Queen to exploit those close to him and summarily dismiss them when they were judged to have served their purpose – or, like the Earl of Essex, to have failed to match up to requirements.

In fact it was just as likely that the severe time constraints on the project ensured that the Strachey text remained basic to Plomer's libretto as it took shape over the ensuing months, despite the fact that its emphasis on the Queen's obsession with a younger lover and the shadow this cast over her declining years was hardly a festive theme. But the Queen's own approval of the plan in April 1952 – whether the specifics of the subject were also explained to her is not known – added to the urgency. Plomer produced a first draft of the libretto by May that same year: Britten began composing in September, and finished the opera in outline in February 1953. Some three weeks before the première extracts were performed for the Queen and Prince Philip at Harewood's London home, and on 1 June – still before the première – Britten was created a Companion of Honour in the Coronation Honours List. All the signs are, therefore, that the Queen herself found nothing seriously inappropriate about the way in which the new Elizabethan age was to be operatically inaugurated.

The Opera in Outline

Plomer's libretto was deliberately heterogeneous in style, mixing prose and verse, archaic and modern English, and Britten's music followed suit in making allusions to Tudor compositions (most notably, John Wilbye's madrigal 'Happy, O happy he') and dance genres – pavane, coranto – while never falling into outright pastiche, and never losing contact with his own very particular musical language: sinewy, sparkling, often flowing into passages of intense lyricism. All three acts explore contrasts between public ceremonial, when the Queen is on display, and private situations where her thoughts and feelings can discount any public context.

Act 1 Scene 1, 'At a tournament', shows that the volatile and charismatic Earl of Essex (Robert Devereux) is obliged by the Queen's intervention to accept temporary reconciliation with his arch rival Lord Mountjoy (Charles Blount), the winner of the (off-stage) joust. As she comes to dominate the scene, the Queen urges the rivals to attend her at court, and the assembled company acclaims Elizabeth in the expansive 'Green leaves' chorus which will return to haunting effect at the very end of the opera.

Scene 2, 'The Queen's private rooms in Nonesuch Palace' begins with her chief adviser Sir Robert Cecil warning her of the dangers of showing affection for the impulsive Essex. Essex himself then appears, and aims to distract the Queen from affairs of state by singing a pair of lute songs, the lively 'Quick music's best', and the eloquently melancholy 'Happy were he' (the latter – to an actual poem by Essex – derived from the opening phrase of Wilbye's madrigal, and richly orchestrated to transform the Tudor genre to which it tellingly alludes).
The Queen is stirred by this 'melting song': yet affection turns to suspicion as Essex rails against his enemies at court. She therefore refuses to grant him his wish to travel to Ireland in order to suppress the Tyrone rebellion, and the act ends with a soliloquy in which she prays for strength 'that I may rule and protect my people

in peace'. Here Britten's music moves from a degree of heroic power quite exceptional in his output to a more restrained and harmonically ambiguous close.

Act 2 Scene 1 – 'Norwich' – is the opera's most overtly ceremonial scene. Elizabeth, with an impatient Essex in tow, is welcomed to Norwich by the Recorder of that city, and a masque is performed in her honour, consisting of six dances and choral pieces: Time, Concord, Time and Concord, Country Girls, Rustics and Fishermen, and a final Dance of Homage. Britten was always in his element with such set pieces, writing music which is unfailingly robust and far from merely 'camp', despite the occasionally precious turn of phrase in Plomer's texts.

Scene 2, 'The garden of Essex's house' finds the Earl's sister, Penelope Rich, and Lord Mountjoy confessing their love. Essex and his wife Frances appear, the Earl complaining at the Queen's unwillingness to let him go to Ireland, and the scene ends with a quartet in which the couples imagine gaining increasing influence as the Queen ages: only Lady Frances Essex is aware of the need for caution.

Scene 3, 'The Palace of Whitehall' reverts to public ceremonial mode. A ball is in progress, with a Pavan and Galliard preceding the grand entry of the Queen. Essex's scheme to irritate Elizabeth by instructing his wife to dress extravagantly succeeds, and the Queen orders a notably energetic dance – a Lavolta – after which the ladies withdraw to change. During a Morris dance, the ladies gradually return, and it turns out that the Queen has managed to appropriate Lady Essex's gown, to grotesque effect: it is far too short for her. After the Queen withdraws again, Mountjoy and Lady Rich attempt to console the humiliated Frances, while Essex fumes. The Queen then returns for a second time, and informs Essex that his wish is to be granted: he is appointed Lord Deputy in Ireland. A celebratory Coranto follows.

Act 3 Scene 1, 'Nonesuch Palace', begins with the Queen's maids discussing Essex's failure in Ireland. When the Earl himself appears he insists on seeing the Queen at once, which means that she is exposed, wigless, in her dressing gown. She remains sympathetic to this troublesome Lord, but his renewed complaints about enemies at court confirm his increasing unreliability. When he has gone, and Cecil returns to emphasise the twin dangers of the continuing Irish rebellion and Essex's sedition, the Queen orders that the Earl be kept under observation. As she declares with weary decisiveness, 'It is I who have to rule'. In **Scene 2**, 'A street in the City of London' a blind ballad-singer tells of Essex's attempts to foment rebellion, and the City Crier proclaims the Earl a traitor.

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Finally, in **Scene 3** ('The Palace of Whitehall') the Queen at first resists the pleas of Cecil and others for her to sign Essex's death warrant immediately. Lady Essex and Lady Rich then appear, and although the Queen is sympathetic to the former, the insolence with which Penelope Rich insinuates that Elizabeth needs Essex and should pardon him on that account drives her to sign the warrant. She is then alone is a timeless void. In a sequence of spoken phrases and exchanges she recalls her relationship with Essex (the music of the second lute song is heard in the orchestra) and reconciles herself to death. The opera ends with the fading strains of the 'Green leaves' chorus.

The First Night – and After

Just how fraught an occasion the first performance of *Gloriana* was – or how much *more* fraught than the first night of any new opera would be – is difficult to establish. In later years, the recollections of the leading singers Joan Cross and Peter Pears led the way in focusing on what seemed, retrospectively, problematic. Cross said that 'what I remember about the first night was an uncomfortable feeling that the piece was under-rehearsed musically': and Pears – who never concealed his doubts as to whether he was temperamentally suited to the role of

Essex – added that 'something intensified the first night nerves, not only because of the artificiality of the occasion. … It was such an unusual relationship with the audience. It was almost like performing to an empty house.' But this was despite the fact that, according to one newspaper report, 'the Queen applauded vigorously for eight minutes' at the end, even though the performance had overrun the scheduled time by 30 minutes. The Press were nevertheless agreed that 'the opera's reception was no more than polite'. There were a mere three curtain calls on the first night, no fewer than eleven on the second.

It is of no little significance, given the atmosphere in the theatre itself, that the most positive critical responses tended to be from those – like *The Spectator*'s Martin Cooper – who had not been there in person, but listened to the live broadcast, as captured in this recording. Certainly, what we now hear has far more confidence and sheer physical power than those later comments by the singers lead you to expect, and much credit was evidently due to the conductor John Pritchard, who showed no signs of playing safe on such an auspicious occasion. Martin Cooper's conclusion was that 'Britten has fulfilled his commission with brilliant success', while Eric Blom, who was present for *The Observer,* declared that 'Miss Cross's impersonation of the Queen, make-up, bearing, understanding and all, will probably never be surpassed'. For Blom, too, John Pritchard's conducting 'left nothing to be desired'. Even so, most critics tended to concentrate more on what they interpreted as the perils of Britten's superficial cleverness, quite failing to appreciate that *Gloriana* was in fact a vigorously ambivalent response to the occasion which has significant points of contact, musically and dramatically, with the dark and dangerous world of treachery and intrigue depicted a year and a half before in *Billy Budd*.

Britten himself often had second thoughts about his operas once he had seen and heard them staged: *Billy Budd* was quite substantially reshaped in 1960, and various

changes were made to *Gloriana* before its revival at Sadlers Wells in 1966 – especially to the final stages of Act 3. This is the version which subsequent recordings have followed, so a recording of the original version is of the greatest historical interest, enabling us, through comparison, to consider whether revisions are also, invariably, improvements. This recording (which includes parts of the original broadcast announcements) also enables us to appreciate the qualities of a cast chosen, for the most part, on account of their stage experience in Britten's operas. In three cases – Edith Coates, Joan Cross and Peter Pears – this went right back to the première of *Peter Grimes* at Sadlers Wells in 1945. Also, several regular members of the Covent Garden company, including Geraint Evans, along with Frederick Dalberg, Rhydderich Davies, Michael Langdon, Ronald Lewis, William McAlpine, David Tree and Inia Te Wiata, had all been involved in the first run of *Billy Budd*. Jennifer Vyvyan had first sung Britten on stage in his version of *The Beggar's Opera* in 1948, and a year after *Gloriana* would make a great impact as the Governess in the first performances of *The Turn of the Screw*. The *Budd* team of Basil Coleman as producer, John Piper as designer and Douglas Robinson as chorus master were also involved again in *Gloriana*, and this continuity must have helped to ensure a degree of confidence and commitment, despite the challenging circumstances of that very special first night.

Britten would never again attempt something as close to 'grand opera' as *Gloriana*. It may indeed be an exception in his extensive theatrical output: but this recording makes clear just how challenging and powerful its original version was. Even at Coronation time, Britten was subversive as well as celebratory, marking his distance from the Establishment while acknowledging its value and necessity. In these terms, *Gloriana* emerges as one of the key works of mid-twentieth-century British culture.

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Having said all that, it is remarkable just how few of our recordings have audible faults. It is important to remember that you are hearing them as the first listeners did over half a century ago.
Roger Beardsley

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Recorded: 8 June 1953, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden
From the Harewood Collection
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