

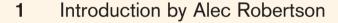
John Blow 1649-1708

Venus & Adonis (ed. Imogen Holst)

Librettist unknown

Venus Heather Harper
Adonis Thomas Hemsley
Cupid Maria Zeri





Choose the formal fool

2 Overture: Maestoso – Allegro – Tempo primo 2'54

Act 1

10

3	Act Tune: Lento	1'31
4	Venus! Adonis!	1'56
5	Hark, hark, the rural music sounds	3'23
6	Come follow, follow, follow	2'23
7	Dance	1'00
	Act 2	
8	Act Tune: Allegretto	1'48
9	You place with such delightful care	3'25



1'48



11 12 13	Dance of Cupids Call, call the Graces Dances of The Graces	0'45 3'36 6'23		
Act 3				
14	Act Tune: Sostenuto	2'33		
15	Adonis, uncall'd-for sighs	3'26		
16	Ah, I could well endure the pointed dart	2'50		
17	Ah! Adonis my love	1'59		
18	With solemn pomp	2'00		
19	Mourn for thy servant	4'31		
20	Announcer	0'38		

Gustav Holst 1874–1934 Sāvitri

Libretto by the composer, adapted from an incident in the Mahābhārata

Sāvitri Arda Mandikian
Satyavan Peter Pears
Death Thomas Hemsley

The English Opera Group

Charles Mackerras



21	Introduction by Imogen Holst	
22	Sāvitri! Sāvitri! I am Death	5'53
23	Greeting to thee, my loving Savitri	0'19
24	The forest is to me a mirror	1'21
25	Love to the lover	0'45
26	Once I knew Maya	1'22
27	Sāvitri! Sāvitri!	0'35
28	I am with thee	2'18
29	Savitri! I am Death	0'54
30	Welcome, Lord	1'05
31	Thine is the holiness	1'31
32	Then enter, Lord	2'51
33	Give me life	2'32
34	Death, the Just One	2'29
35	Loneliness and pain are ended	0'42
36	Sāvitri! Is it thou?	2'45
37	Unto his kingdom	1'04
38	I am with thee	1'22
39	Announcer	0'26

Recorded at the Jubilee Hall, Aldeburgh, June 1956

From the Harewood Collection

Love and death in Aldeburgh, 1956

John Steane

The English Opera Group comes to town

By 1956 the Aldeburgh Festival was in its ninth year and had secured a firm place in the musical calendar. That place was not central, as the Proms were, the regular symphony concerts or the annual *Messiah*: part of the specialness lay in its being, if not eccentric (deliberate or self-advertising oddity would have been abhorrent to its critical spirit), then somewhat to the side. It had not the resources for the Big Event; but neither, very probably, had it the inclination. The 19th century earth-shakers, the clamour of opera singers, the emotional assault of massed violins were uncongenial, even repugnant, to a taste which rather rejoiced in the enforced limitations of parish church and village hall. These after all were perfectly fit for recitals and chamber music, choral works and, at a pinch, productions by the English Opera Group.

This year the company was to present a double-bill. Typically, it would draw upon unfamiliar repertoire, one work from what was then still regarded as the age of early music, the other modern. At least, John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* (c.1680) had a claim to be regarded as the earliest known English opera, and Holst's *Sāvitri*, published in 1916, was not yet as distant in years as *Peter Grimes* is from us now. The two pieces were effectively yoked by the name of Holst, for Gustav wrote the one and his daughter Imogen edited the other. It was this affinity that was most remarked upon by reviewers at the time.

A stronger connection seems to have gone unnoticed. In both operas, the heroine is confronted by Death who suddenly and before time takes from her the man she loves. The difference between them is that Venus laments and Sāvitri takes action. She is a woman of strong character and serious commitment. The Venus of Blow's





opera is hardly that; nor, although she is clearly the precursor of Purcell's Dido, does her musical character achieve the emotional depth or artistic height of Dido's final solo. Blow himself anticipates his great pupil's work most clearly in the final chorus, 'Mourn for thy servant', where the part-writing has a concentrated intensity worthy of his own *Salvator mundi*. And Blow is not without dramatic instinct either — he has prepared for the change of mood in Act 3 with the poignant harmonies of his Sarabande and the solemnity of the Act's introductory Tune.

Tragic opera or entertainment?

Even so, Aldeburgh's double-bill moves into deeper waters with its second opera. Sāvitri proposes a different kind of engagement. We recall the description of Venus and Adonis, taken from one of the early manuscripts and quoted in the 1956 programme, as 'A Masque for the entertainment of the King'. The Restoration Court enjoyed its spectacle, the scenic effects, the dancing, and in this instance no doubt the pretty putti. Charles' mistress, Moll Davies, sang Venus, and little Lady Mary Tudor, their ten-year-old daughter, was the Cupid. The libretto contained lines ('There is a sort of men who delight in heavy chains' is commonly cited) of which those 'in the know' might make what they would. All of this somewhat qualifies the other formal description, of 'Tragic Opera': more essentially, in its own time at least, it was an 'entertainment.

The story of Sāvitri

There is, of course, a danger with *Sāvitri* that it may not, in the commonly accepted sense of the term, 'entertain' at all. Just over half an hour long, it contains little stage-action; the chorus sing wordlessly off-stage, much of the music moves at a moderate pace and there are only three characters. The chamber orchestra is limited to double string quartet, double bass, two flutes and cor anglais. Such spareness suggests perhaps a kind of operatic Samuel Beckett. And indeed *Sāvitri* does haunt the mind in its private quiet after the event, a sure understanding and



even retention in detail proving elusive. The story is simple, drawn from Sanskrit folklore, but its implications, its 'truths', are felt to be mystical. Looked at in a cold, clear light, the fable is not really very satisfactory. The woman bargains with Death and her dead husband comes back to life. But the bargain is based on a syllogistic trick. Death promises to give what she desires as long as it is not her husband's life. She asks for the gift of life, which Death somewhat wonderingly grants. She then claims that an essential constituent of this gift is her husband's life, for she has no life without him. Death, evidently no logician, cannot find an answer to this, and the dead man is revived. One might object that anyway this is merely playing games with the serious matter of the human condition, and that the story, whatever its impressive origins and mystical pretension, is a piece of indulgent sentimentality. Fortunately, that does not dispose of the opera.

The music of Sāvitri

For we have been thinking of $S\bar{a}vitri$ without its music, and (though much modern writing on opera might suggest otherwise) that is not a valid possibility. The opera begins with the spare gravity of unaccompanied voices. Michael Kennedy has noted an affinity with Britten's church parables, and an effect of this opening of $S\bar{a}vitri$ is to suggest something of the timelessness of the parable. The music creates in Sāvitri herself a woman with the strength of inner calm and (remarkably achieved in so short a space) a wonderfully complete sensibility, the great depth of her emotions not precluding the prompt use of an alert intelligence. In retrospect, memory of the opera is dominated by Sāvitri's song: 'I am with thee... making it a thing of joy beyond all other joys'. As the opera progresses, the initially bare score warms and blossoms. The first impression may be of a musical and emotional austerity; that certainly is not the last.



Singers then and listeners now

And it is with a grateful sense of musical and emotional warmth that we hear now this sound recaptured from more than 50 years ago. There will be listeners — and, let us hope, a healthy number of them — to whom these singers were familiar, their voices quickly recognisable now, their presences taking substance in the memory. Some will even have been present on this very occasion. Of the artists who were young then a number are still with us, and what thoughts they will have if they listen again to these performances from so long ago!

On the whole, their efforts were well received. The sheer enterprise of the formulation could hardly fail to have gained applause. Both operas were little-known, though *Venus and Adonis* had recently been recorded (under Anthony Lewis) and *Sāvitri* had had occasional revivals over the years since its first public performance, Arthur Bliss conducting, Dorothy Silk in the name-part, at the Lyric Hammersmith in 1921. Both works had gained a kind of textbook respectability, which can be deadly. Their promotion, combining youthful enthusiasm and freshness with meticulous professionalism, itself deserved praise.

Stage production appears to have been tasteful and effective, though the Cupids in *Venus and Adonis* amused some in the audience more than they did most of the critics (William Mann, writing in *Opera*, remarked 'If you have little girls yourself, you can do without arch capering'). From behind the scenes came reports of trouble with Thomas Hemsley's Adonis costume (the costume mistress complained 'He's not only pregnant, he's carrying high') and after that had been remedied *The Times* found him 'strangely disguised so as to suggest a caricature of Mr Liberace'. Duncan Grant's decor, Michael Northen's lighting, and Clifford Williams' production of *Sāvitri* ('simply but beautifully conceived') all won approval.



Of the singers Hemsley was most consistently praised and the two leading women were the most closely discussed. Listening now to the recording, one may feel that Heather Harper was somewhat under-appreciated and Arda Mandikian judged more favourably possibly on account of her presence and her acting. We gather that, as a result, Harper suffered in Britten's estimation for several years until saving the day, and doing so magnificently, when she substituted for Galina Vishnevskaya in the first performance of the War Requiem. An occasional flutter of vibrant tone affects the definition of a few notes, but the voice itself is fresh and of lovely quality and she sings expressively with a just estimate of the appropriate emotional range: One would think that to attentive ears there was no mistaking the potential. By contrast, Mann found 'an aura of glory' in the Greek soprano's Sāvitri, the voice produced 'with firmness and flexibility'. The recording supports that intermittently, and certainly the flashes of defiance are impressive. But there is a hardness too, and she does not catch the generosity of a full heart in the song as some other singers of the part have done. Incidentally, I believe that in Athens Mandikian had a class-mate in those days named Maria Kaloperopoulou – and what a Sāvitri she could have made!

Her fellow Greek in the company at Aldeburgh, the diminutive Maria Zeri, scored a great success with the audience. Peter Pears was a distinguished Satyavan, and the work of the chorus did not go unremarked. And throughout both operas we feel the invigorating touch of the young Mackerras. The players of the English Opera Group orchestra never let him down, or (presumably) he them. In this confined, unsparing acoustic any fluffed note or neglectful phrasing would tell; and none ever does.

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Blow Holst
Charles Mackerras
LM7410

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Roger Beardsley

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