Berkeley

Ruth world premiere production

Charles Mackerras

mpLIVE

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Ruth
Charles Mackerras
LM7418

Lennox Berkeley 1903–1989

Ruth Op.50

Opera in three scenes (1955–56) to a libretto by Eric Crozier

Naomi	**Una Hale**
Orpah	**April Cantelo**
Ruth	**Anna Pollak**
Boaz	**Peter Pears**
Head reaper	**Thomas Hemsley**

Chorus and Orchestra of The English Opera Group
Charles Mackerras

Recorded live at the world premiere production, Scala Theatre, London, October 1956

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The tracklist below is arranged by CD for the convenience of listeners who wish to convert their downloads to a permanent storage format.

CD 1

1	Announcer	0’24
2	Introduction by Lord Harewood	3’08

Scene 1

3	Prelude	1’53
4	Once more I see your green and golden hills, O Judah	3’29
5	Turn back, my daughters	1’28
6	Almighty Father, let my cry come unto Thee	2’40
7	Ah, must I leave thee? Must we part?	3’17
8	Wither thou goest, I will go	2’30
9	See! Is this Naomi?	1’39
10	Now, call me not Naomi, call me Mara	3’00
11	Where, O where is Naomi?	2’49

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CD 2

1	Introduction to Scene 2 by Lord Harewood	1’23

Scene 2

2	Gold grows the barley on hillside and valley	1’56
3	Greetings, men of Judah	1’00
4	The scattered ear of corn	1’53
5	Come, let us go forth together	2’55
6	Stay, men of Judah	2’03
7	I had no wish to anger them	2’42
8	Ah, let not anger fill your eyes!	2’46
9	Whence cometh this to me	3’47
10	The scatter’d ear of corn	2’28

11	Introduction to Scene 3 by Lord Harewood	2’22

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Scene 3

12	Opening…This is the place! Come daughter.	2’09
13	Fear not, beloved Ruth	2’36
14	Golden ripe the barley grows	1’23
15	Lord of the harvest, what are thy commands?	1’54
16	Winter time is the time to plough	4’38
17	Across the field the long slow line of reapers goes a-reaping	2’42
18	Dance, come dance, dance within the bring	1’26
19	O clap your hands, all ye people!	3’17
20	Go now, my daughter	1’44
21	Master!	1’39
22	Thou comest in the stillness of the night	4’22
23	Lo, my beloved, my soul’s delight, to thee I give my hand	3’23
24	Behold this maid	3’14
25	Rejoice, O Israel, rejoice	2’34
26	Announcer	0’47

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Out of place and time: the first performance of *Ruth*

Lewis Foreman

Gresham's School at Holt is celebrated for its pupils W.H. Auden and Benjamin Britten, but before those two distinguished artistic names the future composer Lennox Berkeley had also been a boarder. It was probably Berkeley who first set Auden to music. Berkeley went up to Oxford in 1922 to read French and Philology, graduating in 1926, and while there he started composing, his output including the song *D'Un Vanneur de blé aux vents* setting words by Joachim du Ballay, soon published by the Oxford University Press as *The Thresher*, Berkeley's earliest published work. In 1926 he secured a BBC performance for his orchestral *Introduction and Dance*, now lost. He was thus securely launched as an up-and-coming composer when, in 1927, he was introduced to Ravel, who after seeing some of his scores, recommended him to Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Berkeley remained with Boulanger for five years, effectively an extended apprenticeship with her, while he lived in Paris. Very much a francophile he was thus acquainted with most of the young French composers of the day, indeed all the leading names who had studied with Boulanger. Back in London he befriended Benjamin Britten, in 1936 jointly composing with him the suite of Catalan dances *Mont Juic*.

Over more than half a century Berkeley composed in all forms, with notable concertos, four symphonies and other orchestral works, many songs and piano music, choral works and music for the theatre including ballet and operas.
In 1936 he completed the short oratorio *Jonah* which received its first broadcast that summer but was not well received by the critics at Leeds the following year

and has since been forgotten. With its operatic mix of arias, recitatives and choruses it was his first step towards his later operas. In 1938 Berkeley's ballet *The Judgement of Paris* was danced by the Vic-Wells company under Constant Lambert, providing him with practical experience of the stage. Then came incidental music for a Montague Slater play at the Mercury Theatre. During the war he wrote music for BBC features and after the war, provided incidental music for Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and orchestrated music by Fauré for the ballet *La fête étranger*. So when he came to write his first operas he was not without experience in treating a .dramatic subject

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Berkeley's first two operas appeared within three months of each other, the delightful one-acter *A Dinner Engagement* at Aldeburgh in June 1954, quickly followed by the grand opera, *Nelson,* seen at Sadler's Wells in September. The former, a comedy, established Berkeley as an effective composer for the operatic stage, but at a time when successively British composers as varied as Bliss, Britten and Walton were producing major operatic scores the more ambitious *Nelson* failed to become established. *A Dinner Engagement* was written for the English Opera Group, and it was for that essentially small and practical group that he went on to compose *Ruth*, which opened at London's Scala Theatre on 2 October 1956. It was repeated at the Aldeburgh Festival on 20 June 1957.

In setting the Biblical story of Ruth, and doing so using language derived from the King James Bible, Berkeley was entering a long and rich, mainly 19th-century tradition, though one suspects he was ignorant of most of it. Ruth was the subject

of George Tolhurst's ridiculed cantata of 1867. Later Otto Goldschmidt had treated the subject as a 'sacred pastoral' in his 1870 setting, Leopold Damrosch thought it a 'scriptural idyll' in 1875 while Sir Frederick Cowen had set it as a full blown dramatic oratorio in 1887, while Alfred Gaul had produced a once-favourite version for production by local choirs. On the continent Rostand, César Franck and Litolf had set it, while in Germany in 1908 Georg Schumann had produced *Ruth* as a grand Elgarian cantata. In our own day Wilfrid Mellers' *Song of Ruth* had preceded it in 1950 and Sir Thomas Beecham's son Adrian followed Berkeley with a cantata in 1957. But ultimately Lennox Berkeley succeeded with a story which all too easily can bed down into a pastoral contemplation, but by writing a work for the theatre he found the drama his predecessors had largely failed to show.

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Synopsis

Scene 1

A mountainous place near Bethlehem

Naomi, an elderly widow of Bethlehem-in-Judah, returns to Judah after living many years in the land of Moab. She is accompanied by her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, Moabite women whose husbands have died. Naomi urges them to turn back from Judah to their homeland, where they may yet find husbands. Orpah is persuaded to return. Ruth pleads her devotion to Naomi and insists on staying with her. As they go on towards the city, they are met by some women of Bethlehem, who marvel at the changes that time and destitution have wrought upon Naomi. They lead the exhausted travellers into the city.

Scene 2

A harvest field belonging to Boaz

The reapers are preparing to harvest a field of barley, when some women come out to them, seeking permission to glean in the field. This permission is freely granted, but their curiosity is aroused by the arrival of a stranger, the foreign woman Ruth. Her plea to join them in the gleaning provokes an outburst of hostility and violence. Ruth is saved by the arrival of Boaz, a patriarchal figure of great authority and a distant kinsman of Naomi's. He rebukes his labourers, sends them about their work, and questions Ruth.

Her loveliness, her youth, and her dignity in hardship make a strong impression upon him. He sends her home to Naomi with the gift of a basket of corn and, as he admiringly watches her depart, the song of the reapers is heard from farther down the field.

Scene 3

A threshing-floor, at night

Harvest is now ended. Naomi brings Ruth to the threshing-floor, where the ceremony of harvest-home is to be celebrated that night. In consequence of the death of her menfolk, Naomi's line will be extinct unless Boaz can be persuaded to contract a marriage with his distant kinswoman Ruth. Ruth is nervous about offering herself to a man so far above her in wealth and rank, but Naomi begs her to undertake the task.

The two women hide as the sound of a joyful harvest-song is heard offstage. The labourers come marching in procession to the threshing-floor, bringing with them a huge effigy of the Corn King, spirit of harvest, which is set up to preside over their annual ritual of songs and dances. They celebrate their seasonal tasks of ploughing, sowing the seed, reaping, gleaning and bringing home the ripe corn, and the climax of their pagan festival takes the form of a round dance, in which they bid farewell to the dying summer and welcome the spring. Boaz ends the festivities with a prayer of thanksgiving for harvest, and his weary people leave the threshing-floor to sleep.

Ruth now comes from her hiding-place. Approaching the spot where Boaz has lain down to rest, she prostrates herself. When he awakes, she humbly begs him to take her to wife. Boaz is deeply moved by the selflessness of the young woman.
The liking between them swiftly ripens into love, and Boaz seals the covenant by spreading his cloak over his bride. He then calls his people up from sleep to witness the marriage. They applaud his choice, prophesying that Ruth will bring fresh glory to the house of Israel and that she will found a line of kings.

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Berkeley manages to inject considerable contrast into his treatment, as well as personality and emotion into his characters. Before him only Bantock, in a far more romantic idiom, had treated such a biblical theme as a living drama, when he had set *The Song of Songs* in Straussian style. Berkeley's short prelude evokes the journey of the three women, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah, and frames the opening scene, the writing for strings instantly proclaiming a family resemblance to Berkeley's music for *Four Poems of St Teresa of Avila*. In the most static part of the work the aged Naomi sings of the hills of Judah and urges her daughters in-law to return to their own people in Moab ('Turn back, my daughters'). Ruth refuses and declares she will stay with her mother-in-law ('Whither thou goest, I will go'). Naomi's people welcome her back, but comment on her loss of beauty (female chorus: 'See! It is Naomi!'). She bitterly resents her present state of widowhood and beggary, in a striking aria singing 'Let Mara be my name'; mara means bitter. The scene ends vigorously as female chorus and soloists ask: 'Where, oh, where is Naomi?'

In the second scene the addition of male voices brings a new vibrancy to the music. There is no separate prelude, the orchestral introduction running just 26 seconds and creating a totally new atmosphere. It is a harvest scene and we are in a field belonging to the rich landowner Boaz. Ruth asks if she can glean (for fallen grains of wheat), as was the custom, but the harvesters brusquely refuse her because she is a stranger and 'not one of us' and they threaten to stone her. She is rescued by Boaz ('Stay, men of Judah') who rebukes them. Ruth sings 'I had no wish to anger them' and an ensemble develops in which Boaz is taken by her beauty and poise as she asks him not to admonish the harvesters 'Ah, let not anger fill your eyes'. He asks her name and on learning of her situation he gives her permission to walk the fields. In a duet (or rather a double soliloquy) Ruth sings 'Whence cometh this to me, that thou should'st deign to notice me?' while Boaz celebrates finding her. He gives her a present of wheat, and sings of her qualities.

The orchestral prelude to the last scene heralds a vigorous celebration on the threshing-floor, at night. Naomi and Ruth arrive ('This is the place') but they are apprehensive because of their poor appearance. Naomi sings the aria 'Fear not, beloved Ruth'. The harvesters appear (with the unaccompanied chorus 'Golden ripe the barley grows') and ask 'Lord of the Harvest, what are Thy commands?' He calls for wine, later for a harvest song. In a stroke of genius Berkeley follows with seven choral dances – in fact the harvest celebration, starting with 'Winter time is time to plough'. In a quiet interlude the women sing an extended reflective number 'Across the field the long slow line of reapers goes a-reaping' and after lamenting the end of summer the men respond energetically – 'Dance, come dance, dance within the ring' – and the Lord of the Harvest ends the celebration

singing unaccompanied 'O clap your hands, all ye people!' asking the assembly to 'sing praises'. All sing a quiet hymn of praise, echoed by the harvest horn.

Naomi tells Ruth not to be afraid and she dedicates herself to God. She addresses Boaz ('Master!') asking him to 'spread thy cloak on me – that I may be thy wife'. Boaz needs a few moments to understand her proposal, but responds with his chiselled aria 'Thou comest in the stillness of the night as once the angels came'. They have a remarkably stylised love duet and when both Boaz and then Ruth sing 'Lo, my beloved, my soul's delight, to thee I give my hand', Boaz summons his people to witness the covenant of his marriage to Ruth. 'Behold this maid' sings Boas – its almost an elegy over marching piano chords and a sustained string line, with repeated instrumental lines as all join in it acquires a visionary quality – after all their union will establish the House of David; she is to be, in fact, the future King David's great grandmother. In a fast angular finale all sing a hymn of rejoicing: 'Rejoice, O Israel, rejoice'.

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Roger Beardsley

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Original recording from the Harewood Collection
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