

Notes on a cut-down “King Arthur” with a one-to-a-part orchestra

John Beasley, September 2011

These notes relate to a run-through of the music from Purcell’s “King Arthur” in June 2011 with a reduced orchestra, and have been written in case they are of interest to anyone thinking of doing the same. Our run-through was just for the pleasure of doing the music, with no stage action and no audience beyond the singers and players themselves, but many of its principles would seem to apply also to a stage performance in a venue small enough for a one-player-per-part orchestra to be appropriate. “King Arthur” has been a favourite of mine ever since I was introduced to it by the late Roy Terry, Head of Music at St George’s School, Harpenden, who mounted a stage performance in 1972. It has some delightful music, and most of the solos, being songs rather than arias, are suited to performance by people who are competent amateur madrigal singers rather than operatic soloists.

Our singers used the 1897 Fuller Maitland edition, vocal scores of which could be borrowed from the Hertfordshire County Library, but the orchestral parts were based on the 1971 Laurie edition and we had to make a fair number of markups to the vocal scores. I would expect most people doing “King Arthur” nowadays to use Laurie vocal scores, and what follows is couched in terms of these and of the associated full score.

Our orchestra consisted of two violins, viola, cello, treble recorder, mute cornett, and keyboard, with Sue (narrator) and myself (conductor) coming in as second and third recorders as needed. The notes that follow describe the rescoring involved. The keyboard was a little four-octave virginal (Morley, c. 1970, completely refurbished and rejacked by Tania Staite a few years ago), and although very much a bottom-of-the-range harpsichord by modern standards it proved quite strong enough for the job in hand. The singers had had the music in advance, we had a practice session in the morning with just cello and keyboard, and the whole orchestra came in after lunch.

- We used the “First Music” (Laurie 1) as a “stop eating and gather round” piece to call the singers in after lunch (we started the afternoon with fifteen minutes for the orchestra alone to sort a few things out and to get to know each other). Fuller Maitland puts it at the end as a “Grand Dance” and for a stage performance I might well be inclined to do the same, but for our purposes it seemed more appropriate to end on “Your nations” with all the singers involved.
- The D major overture (Laurie 4) could not be used with the reduced forces (quite apart from needing two trumpets, it is scored for strings in five independent parts), but the D minor overture (Laurie 2) made an entirely acceptable substitute. We gave it to the strings alone.
- The Sacrifice Scene (Laurie 5-9) was done “as is”. This and all subsequent scenes were preceded by a brief spoken narration.
- “Come if you dare” (Laurie 10) was rescored for mute cornett, violin, viola, and cello, the mute cornett playing the original first trumpet / first oboe / first violin part and the violin the original second violin / second oboe part. In bars 5-8, we replaced the second trumpet by the cello, playing the same notes as in bars 1-4 since there was no longer a need to accommodate the limitations of the natural trumpet, and the keyboard did not play during bars 5-8 and 25-28. The use of a mute cornett instead of a trumpet was spectacularly successful, producing just the right sound at just the right volume for the conditions. Why did such a lovely instrument ever fall out of use?
- We preceded the Philadell / Grimbald scene (Laurie 12-15) by the D minor air which is Laurie 33 (we slotted in these pleasant little orchestral pieces as and when the mood and key seemed most appropriate), and we gave the obbligato to Philadell’s aria (Laurie 12) to treble and tenor recorders. We didn’t have the forces to divide the chorus in Laurie 12/14, and so made the differentiation by singing with orchestra when we were Philadell’s spirits and without when we were Grimbald’s. This was made easier because the Fuller Maitland vocal scores print these double choruses on four staves only. During the narrator’s introduction, the evil Grimbald came forward and took a bow (booing and hissing encouraged), followed by a curtsy from Philadell (loud cheering). We also let Grimbald snarl his lines “Curse on her Voice” (on page xix of the Laurie full score) before “Come follow me”.

On page 47, bottom system, notes 3-5, I encouraged the soloist to sing C-A-F instead of E-C-F. According to the critical commentary in the Laurie full score (I haven't examined any of the original sources myself), the earliest sources, followed by Laurie, give E-C-F, but the leap from low F to high E is awkward, and some later sources, followed by Fuller Maitland, give C-C-F. However, if E-C-F was indeed an error, C-A-F, again echoed by the subsequent F-D-G, strikes me as much the most likely intention (E-C instead of C-A in such a context is the sort of mistake I make myself when copying) even though no early source gives it and no modern editor appears to have suggested it.

On page 51, system 2, bar 2, and again on page 52, bottom system, bar 1, I invited the soloist to sing dotted quaver G#, semiquaver A, crotchet B, crotchet E instead of the phrase as written. There is no authority whatever for this change, but it makes the passage very much easier to sing. I think I remember the phrase being sung this way in Roy Terry's production.

- We preceded the Shepherd Scene (Laurie 16-18) by the G minor hornpipe which is Laurie 30. Fuller Maitland arranges "How blest are shepherds" (Laurie 16) with alternating solo and chorus sections as in "Come if you dare", and for a non-stage performance this does indeed seem preferable. We played the opening "Symphony" of "Shepherd, shepherd, leave decoying" (Laurie 17) as an unaccompanied recorder trio (treble, tenor, bass, no continuo).

As a general principle, all questions of double-dotting and ornamentation were left to the performers, but the jerky rhythm in bars 3/11/27/36/52/60, although given in the earliest sources, becomes very clumsy when the tune is repeated by the chorus, and I greatly prefer the even quavers given in the source followed by Fuller Maitland. We therefore marked up as follows: first violin, bar 3, replace notes 4-6 by quaver B slurred to quaver A, and bar 11, replace notes 4-6 by quaver C slurred to quaver B; tenor solo, the same in bars 27 and 36; first violin and sopranos, the same again in bars 52 and 60. Some of "Come, shepherds" (Laurie 18) is very messy in the sources followed by Laurie, and I suspect that Purcell wrote out just the top and bottom lines (he produced so much in his short life that something like this must surely have happened from time to time) and left the filling in to an assistant whose work was never properly checked. Fuller Maitland followed a later source which sorted out some of the problems, but I went the whole hog, threw it out, and instead fitted the words to the instrumental setting of the tune (last three notes of Laurie page 78 and the whole of page 79, parts as in the Laurie full score with a little rearrangement and octave transposition). However, having sung the tenor line in the result, I have to say that this did not seem fully satisfactory either.

- The original music for the scene where Philadell cures Emmeline's blindness has been lost, but the words are on page xxii of the Laurie full score and it seemed a pity not to try and do something. I accordingly asked our soloist to provide a short recitative for "Thus, Thus I infuse / These Sovereign [*sic*] Dews" (the bass being a low held Bb, moving up to F for "Dews"), and then fitted the rest of the words to "Ego cubui et dormivi" from "Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei!". It was necessary to repeat the opening word "Fly" and to insert an upbeat semiquaver for the "Your" of "Your Noxious Vapours", but otherwise words and music fitted perfectly. The recitative and bars 1-8 took us down to "admit the Day", after which the chorus repeated "Now cast your Eyes abroad, and see" as often as was needed during bars 9-13, and finished with "All but me" in bar 14. The first eight bars were done without keyboard, and in bars 12-14 the top two parts were interchanged so that the sopranos had the higher line. Not only was the metrical agreement of words and music almost miraculous, but the change to the major at the end was just right.

All this was preceded by the little D minor air which is Laurie 3.

- In the Frost Scene (Laurie 20-29), we omitted "Sound a parley" (Laurie 29). It is fairly demanding on the soprano, and we hadn't come to listen to each other sing lengthy duets. But I've never heard this (it was omitted from Roy Terry's production as well) and suspect it may be rather a fine piece. Indeed, given the words and bearing in mind what we did for "St George" (see below), how might it sound with two mute cornetts replacing the violins?
- "Two daughters" (Laurie 31) was transposed down to E minor for the convenience of the singers. F minor might have been a better choice.

- The Passacaglia (Laurie 32) was rescored, treble-tenor-bass recorders replacing oboes and tenor oboe (cello playing throughout except where the music dropped to three parts). So the “Full” section (bars 1-4) was played by the strings, after which recorders and strings played antiphonally until bar 57; everybody in when doubling the chorus; strings and recorders antiphonally from bar 90 to bar 134, “both” sections being played by strings alone (in bar 102, tenor recorder played crotchet D and crotchet Eb); everybody in until the end. The duet (bars 134-176) was marked as a possible cut, bars 160-166 being cruelly demanding on the soprano, but in the event she was willing to give it a go and it went very well. The “three women” and “three men” sections in bars 197-234 were sung chorally. However, I felt that the substitution of recorders for oboes was not entirely successful (partly for reasons of balance, partly because Sue and I were not playing to the standard of the rest of the orchestra), and a better solution, if suitable players could be found, might be to use oboes with their players doubling on recorders where these were needed elsewhere.

There are some textual difficulties in this movement. According to the commentary in the Laurie full score, some sources end at bar 197, and I have to say that I doubt the authenticity of bars 197-234. I claim no detailed technical expertise and they are pleasant enough, but they don’t “feel” right for Purcell. Laurie’s criticisms of the earliest sources of bars 197-213 are clearly valid and her criticisms of the later source followed by Fuller Maitland have merit, but I have seen no better resolution of the difficulties and in the event we followed Fuller Maitland: bars 197-213, viola playing the bass line given in full-size print on pages 131-132 of the Laurie full score (no cello or keyboard); bar 199, note 3, second soprano C, alto A, and the same again at bar 203. I also simplified the alto line in bars 211 and 233-234 to make it easier to sing: bar 211, dotted crotchet A, then crotchet A slurred to quaver Bb; bar 233, note 3, low D; bar 234, note 1, G. Given the generally suspect nature of the passage and the curious awkwardness of the line as given, I felt no compunction about making these changes.

In the Fuller Maitland vocal scores, there are minor differences between bars 181-189, 189-197, and 234-242, and I brought them into alignment, but no such differences occur in the Laurie edition. There is a curious false relation between alto and viola in bars 182, 190, and 235, and Laurie suggests changing the second viola F to F# to remove it. I think most people would agree.

- The obbligato to “Ye blust’ring brethren” (Laurie 35) was provided by two treble recorders as in the original. We preceded this by the “Symphony” (Laurie 36), the mute cornett again playing the trumpet part.
- We started the “Vision of Britain” scene with Laurie 34/37-40 all transposed down a minor third for the singers’ convenience. Being now already in G major, we could omit Laurie 41 (the duet “You say ’tis Love”), and we continued at printed pitch with the second trumpet tune (Laurie 42), a replacement “St George” as described below, and “Ye nations” (pages 163-165 of Laurie 43). The first trumpet tune (Laurie 34) was rescored for mute cornett, violin, viola, and cello, the mute cornett playing the original trumpet part and the violin the second violin part. “For folded flocks” (Laurie 38) was intended to be done by male voices chorally, but it came apart at the morning practice session (we were all getting a bit tired) and in the event we omitted it. We intended to do “Your hay it is mow’d” (Laurie 39) as an unaccompanied male voice trio, tenor-baritone-bass, and bars 6-11 of the solo section were omitted with the idea that each of the three boozers could take a verse in turn and the last verse be done by all three in unison (as transposed, and with this cut, the solo line doesn’t go above B). In practice, it didn’t quite work out like this, but never mind. “Fairest isle” (Laurie 40) was rearranged, the orchestral introduction being omitted, the first verse being done by a solo voice as printed, and the second verse by the chorus (it was just a matter of giving the orchestral parts to the singers and fitting the words to them). The second trumpet tune (Laurie 42), like the first, was rescored for mute cornett, violin, viola, and cello, the mute cornett playing the original first trumpet part and the violin the second violin part. “St George” (Laurie 43, pages 159-162) was omitted, being long, dull, and in my opinion almost certainly not authentic, and at a late stage I suggested substituting bars 1-56 of “Thus the gloomy world” from Act V of “The Fairy Queen”. This fitted the words reasonably well, if not as well as something Purcell had written specially for them would have done, and I would do the same again. Lacking a counter-tenor, we gave the part to a soprano, and she and the mute cornett blended quite gloriously. Finally, “Ye nations” was rescored for mute cornett, two violins, viola, and cello, the mute cornett playing the original first trumpet part and the first violin the original second trumpet part.

There are several textual problems here. In "Round thy coast" (Laurie 37), the phrase in bar 7 may be negotiable by an expert soloist, but the sopranos in the chorus cannot be expected to negotiate it when it recurs at bar 23, and I deliberately simplified notes 3-8 in both bars to crotchet C#, crotchet D#, crotchet E (crotchet A#, crotchet B#, crotchet C# in our transposition). Although in general an eminently realistic and practical composer, Purcell does occasionally expect soloists to negotiate what to me are unsingable intervals - I suspect that he had perfect pitch and so didn't find them difficult - but he doesn't normally make similar demands on the chorus. In "Your hay it is mow'd" (Laurie 39), bar 13, baritone, G at note 1 is surely an error (though it appears both in the full score and in the vocal score), and we sang A (F# in our transposition). Bars 107 and 108 of "Ye nations" (Laurie 43) are a mess. The earliest sources have the upper parts cadencing in G and the lower parts in C, which is clearly wrong. Most later sources, including that followed by Fuller Maitland, change the lower parts to match the upper; Laurie, to me inexplicably, does it the other way round, and I emphatically prefer the solution followed by Fuller Maitland. Since we were using Fuller Maitland vocal scores, no action was needed apart from the rubbing out of markups which previous borrowers had inserted to make the parts agree with Laurie, but using Laurie vocal scores I would mark up as follows: page 163, last bar, last note, soprano E, tenor C, bass C; page 164, first bar, soprano D and D, tenor B, bass G; page 165, penultimate (first time) bar, soprano, last note, D. We made the same changes in the orchestral parts. I might add that "Ye nations", like "St George", strikes me as unauthentic - it doesn't "feel" right for Purcell - but it makes an enjoyable tub-thumper with which to finish.

Despite the reduced orchestra, this fitted in all the music apart from the seven-part D major overture (Laurie 4), the A minor air (Laurie 19) which I find rather dull but which could have been accommodated somewhere had anyone screamed for its inclusion, the lengthy duets "Sound a parley" and "You say 'tis Love", which would have slowed things down too much in our circumstances but which others in a different context might well include, and the original "St George".

As regards the edition used by the singers, there would have been some markups even had we used Laurie vocal scores, and it seemed better to borrow Fuller Maitland vocal scores from Hertfordshire, mark them up in advance, and hand them round, than to ask people to get Laurie vocal scores and then have to spend time at the practice session making sure that everybody had included all the markups (Hertfordshire could not supply Laurie vocal scores). However, there were one or two places where time was wasted because I had overlooked a repeat which was in the orchestral parts but not in the vocal scores or vice versa, and perhaps the decision was a wrong one.