

Iernin - A Celtic Opera (3 CD Set)

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Short Description

BBC Concert Orchestra, BBC Singers.

Conducted by George Lloyd.

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Iernin, one of three operas written by George Lloyd, was written between July 1933 and June 1934. It was first performed at the Pavilion, Penzance, during the week of November 5-10, 1934. Subsequently it ran for a short season at the Lyceum, London, during June 1935. This recording is taken from a BBC broadcast. Performers include Geoffrey Pogson, Henry Herford, Malcolm Rivers, Jonathon Robarts, Jeremy White, Stephen Jackson, Marilyn Hill Smith, Claire Powell, Marion Fiddick, Kate Lock and Hedley Goodall. The BBC Concert Orchestra and Singers were conducted by George Lloyd. The story takes place in West Penwith in Cornwall around 950 A.D. and is based on characters from the Celtic Faery World.Â

This disc is *** recommended by the Penguin Guide to Compact Disc

3 CD Set includes 30 minute conversation between George Lloyd and the opera producer Chris De Souza.

Reviews:

George Lloyd showed that rarest of all qualities in a British composer, an almost unerring perception of what the

stage requires. An extraordinary achievement. ***The Times***

One of the most successful operas written by a British composer. ***The Musical Times***

...Scenes of great dramatic intensity and moments of lyricism are embodied in the Cornish grand opera "Iernin" ...the work contains passages of great beauty, and cadences of transcending loveliness are produced by the orchestra, especially some fine writing for the brass in the first act. The music has a wild, haunting charm, which holds the audience in its thrall. ***The Cornishman***

Mr Lloyd is bound to no schools or theories...has a vigorous individuality...he is not afraid to write a tune... ***Daily Telegraph***

A remarkably assured work for a 19 year old...many notable moments including the multi-part choral writing for 'The Giant of Carn Galva' and the magical closing chorus...in fact the whole of the final scene...is impressive...the lovely aria 'The Spell is Past' is reminiscent of Puccini in its Romantic intensity... ***BBC Music Magazine***

Iernin, despite the passing of time shows what a powerful, original, work it was for any time...it unfolds in a gripping way...it rings of mystic Cornwall...a libretto that carries more meaning and message about human outlooks on religion than the simplicities of a Celtic music drama... ***Bristol Evening Post***

I do find that the heart goes out to this opera. Some of the causes may be suspect. Perhaps it is sentimental to allow knowledge of the composer's age at the time of writing (George Lloyd was 21) to influence one's response, but it does. Then there is the pleasure of seeing the work which enjoyed so much success followed by such complete neglect convincingly revived, with the composer, now as conductor, renewing acquaintance with his own music half a century later. Also, it must be admitted, a certain sneaky partisan sympathy extends itself to the octogenarian who in answer to his interviewer's question says that he doubts whether he would ever write another opera, because, quite apart from the expense of energy, he dislikes most modern stage productions and thinks that in most opera houses producers have too much power. His own opera, he says, was written for singers: the melodic line came first, and the expressive power of the music is concentrated primarily in that.

The work has an interesting history. It originated from a late-night conversation his father had with a friend on their return from a visit to Covent Garden. Opera in England and English opera were both found wanting. The friend, Penzance's indefatigable amateur impresario, Walter Barnes, proposed a school for Cornish opera: "You write it, I'll put it on". Four days later the father came up with a libretto, and George began to wander the moors around Zennor. Within a year the opera was complete, the friend was as good as his word, and by the happiest of chances Frank Howes, The Times's critic, taking his holidays in Cornwall, attended the première and loved it. A London season followed in 1935, playing to enthusiastic houses and defeated only by the heat-wave which emptied the theatres that summer.

The recording was made in 1985 from a broadcast which went out the following year. Its producer, Chris de Souza conducts and excellent interview with the composer on the final track of the third disc. At the London première, The Times (presumably Frank Howes again) found the opera spontaneous in invention and almost consistently effective ... the only exception [being] the choral writing which, conceived along the usual lines and largely unisonous, does not quite achieve the composer's intentions and might well be revised". Whether the hint was taken we are not told, but the score has not been revised for this performance, and most of the choral writing (not all that "unisonous") works well. More important is the writing for soloists, and on the whole this seems instinctively expert: for instance, the high notes are sparingly required, so that when they occur they have maximum effect. The heroine's role wants a coloratura soprano who also has a substantial middle and lower-middle register. That should not be too much to ask, but I fear it is, and one can only guess at the kind of Italianate full-bodied sound that was probably in the composer's ear when he wrote the work. Marilyn Hill-Smith is more successful with the higher, more agile and less dramatic parts of the role. All the male principals have splendidly singable music, but the best performance comes from Claire Powell, sumptuous of voice and noble of manner in the role which at the Lyceum was shared between a formidable pair of contraltos, Astra Desmond and Edith Furmedge. The orchestral playing is fine and responsive to impulse. Recorded sound is clear, though I rarely found myself 'seeing' the stage while listening. It is a pity the booklet contains no essay or historical note, but the interview largely makes up for that.

JBS Gramophone, Sept. 1994

Those people allergic to George Lloyd's tuneful, conservative idiom had better stop reading now, because they will be very unhappy with this review. I had frankly doubted that Lloyd had the dramatic gifts to sustain a full-length opera, and I approached this with caution. WRONG. Although there are some moments where I think the inspiration runs thin (the second scene of Act II, for instance, where a kind of hokey dialog retells the legend of Iernin and her sisters from the Celtic faery world), on the whole this is a lovely opera with something that most of us despaired of finding in a twentieth-century work - tunes that stay in the memory. Let us clarify at the outset that this is no new work.

It was written in 1933-34, and in its first year had a real run of successful performances in London. But after the

War, Lloyd's music fell out of fashion and it lay dormant until 1985, when it was recorded for broadcast on the BBC. It is that recording that Albany has now released to the public, and what a find it is. Here is an opera filled with old-fashioned arias, love duets, soaring melodies, and rich orchestration. Yes, it is simple in construction, but I find it fascinating that if you write like Webern, simplicity is called "economy" and is praised: but if you write like Lloyd, simplicity is equated with simple-mindedness. Never mind - if you respond to Romantic vocal music, you'll want to get to know this opera. If I bring up other names (Puccini, Strauss, Elgar) it is not to say that Lloyd sounds like them (he does not), but that those are points of reference for the listener unaware of Lloyd's music. There is an insightful interview with the composer at the end of the third disc, by the way, which I would recommend listening to first. As I write this, I am on my fifth hearing of the opera, and listening to the Iernin-Gerent duet from the last act. This is thrilling stuff. Some might call it obvious, but so is the first-act duet from *La Bohème*. A real melodic gift is a rare quality, and Lloyd has it in abundance. His orchestration is very colorful, and it is distinctive; those who know his symphonies will find the same thumbprints here. You can speak about other composers as points of reference, but Lloyd sounds like Lloyd. (There is, though, one theme in the second act that does sound like the first movement of Mahler's Fifth in its contours and its handling strings. It is a passing moment, though, and a lovely one I might add.) Some will criticize this as being "light" opera - or perhaps "serious musical comedy". That is a possible description (not one I would use, but a possible one), but hardly a criticism. This is a fairy-tale opera - the kind of mythology that inspired Catalani in *Lorelei*, Puccini in *Le Villi*, and Strauss in *Daphne*. The legend is of a saint turning the fairy Iernin and her sisters into a circle of stones, known as the Nine Maidens, because they had been dancing pagan dances and seducing human men. Iernin regains her life at the beginning (we are not sure what had led to this transformation), and of course falls in love with the opera's hero, Gerent. The story of the opera is that of this love cannot be. This is the stuff of which many Romantic operas are made, and Lloyd treats it with delicacy, taste, and tenderness. Anything I might add to this would be needlessly repetitive. If one were to find fault, it could be in the area of what I would call musical development or momentum. This is not an opera that gathers force as it proceeds, and seems to have about it an inevitable direction. Rather it is a sequence of attractive scenes, some dramatic and some (most, really) lyrical. But its lyrical strengths are such that one doesn't mind very much. Composers who write this gratefully for the voice and the orchestra are rare in any generation, but particularly in our own. The performance and recording are first-rate. Lloyd has always been an extraordinarily convincing conductor of his own music, and he paces this opera very well. The singing is committed and accomplished, the balances excellent. The booklet gives us a brief synopsis and a complete libretto even though the opera is sung in English with relatively clear diction.

This is a production of which everyone involved can be proud.

Henry Fogel, Fanfare.

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