

George Lloyd and Charles Causley – *The Burning Boy*

In December 1956, Norman Fulton, Head of Music, BBC West, wrote to George Lloyd with a proposal for a new radio opera, with music by George. The libretto was to be written by fellow Cornishman, the poet Charles Causley, and there was a brief requiring that *'resources should be small and easily handled in a broadcast studio'*. The composer and librettist were to confer and agree a storyline, to be submitted with an outline of the resources required. When both had been approved, the commission would follow.

George Lloyd and Charles Causley met in Bristol in December 1956, and again at The old Keeper's Cottage in February 1957, where Charles clearly took a shine to Nancy – or at least to her cooking, for he wrote a short poem *'Mistress Lloyd's Fancy'* in honour of her skill with the icing sugar. Despite the lack of a firm commission, and the absence of the normal advance fee, Charles set to work on his libretto, which he said was *'buzzing in his head.'* It was to be a modern interpretation of an incident in the life of the prophet Elisha, entitled *The Burning Boy*. He was so keen on making it into an opera that he withdrew a poem of the same title which had been accepted by the PEN Anthology, so as not to sabotage the radio opera. He wrote to George in July 1957, bewailing the fact that he had been unable to extract the fee from the BBC. Causley was in no doubt that he considered the commission to be a contract and had re-arranged his writing commitments in order to complete the work. George took the matter up with the Norman Fulton at the BBC, asking for confirmation, only to be informed that *"it would be pointless to proceed with a firm commission due to the present re- planning of Sound Broadcasting "* although the letter added: *" please look on these as a mere postponement as I am determined to proceed with the project to a satisfactory ending."*

The composer and librettist conferred again, and Causley proposed that they should make a fuss and force the BBC to stick to the agreement. He guessed that that recent listening figures for BBC sound radio had caused a panic, and that they would really like to shelve the project, so were hedging. George wrote again, very politely, for clarification of their intentions. The commission was cancelled, and the opera disappeared from view for 60 years.

2019 Postscript: In 2017, Causley's libretto of *The Burning Boy* surfaced again. It was described as *'one of the most important Causley texts, as yet unperformed.'* It was taken up by Duchy Opera and premiered in 2017, with music by composer Stephen McNeff.

Mistress Lloyd's Fancy

Hail to bright Nancy: who, with sweet stiletto,
Wrote in white icing-sugar her libretto :
And, like Cecilia in the kitchen stood,
Composing oratorios of food.

Would, cried the stuffed composer, rumbling poet,
We, with our genius, could so surely show it!

Charles Causley

At Folke, February 1957

Note:

Charles Causley and George Lloyd met several times at The Old Keeper's Cottage, Folke, near Sherborne, following a commission from Norman Fulton, BBC West, to produce an opera, The Burning Boy. The commission was cancelled before it was produced, presumably due to financial cutbacks following a review of radio audiences. (Letters from Causley, 1957)



Charles Causley - by Stan Simmons



George Lloyd – by Austen Pinkerton