

THE LITTLE OPERA COMPANY

presents



A Dinner Engagement, Op. 45

An Opera in Two Scenes

STUDY GUIDE

THIS OPERA IS PRESENTED WITH THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF
THE MANITOBA ARTS COUNCIL THE WINNIPEG ARTS COUNCIL
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THE LITTLE OPERA COMPANY is excited to have you as our guest for this production of Lennox Berkeley's opera, *A Dinner Engagement*. We have created this study guide for teachers to help their students make the most of this opera experience.

NEW TO OPERA?

To ensure that your trip to the theatre is problem free and enjoyable, we recommend that you review the following with your students before you arrive.

Theatres have certain rules for audience members. Two that you should know are:

- Using a camera or any type of recording equipment is not allowed. Flash cameras are especially distracting for the performers, so theatres ask that audience members do not take pictures during the performance.
- Unlike cinemas, theatres do not allow refreshments or snacks to be consumed in the seating area. Refreshments should be consumed in the lobby, before entering the theatre.

In addition to rules that theatres ask you to follow, there are some practices of etiquette that everyone who attends a live performance follows to show respect for the performers and each other:

- We show respect for fellow audience members and the performers on stage by not making any kind of noise during the performance. Most people understand this means not talking during a performance, but it also means that we don't whisper. Whispering can be heard by people close by, and if enough people whisper, the performers can even hear it. Besides talking and whispering, we also avoid other distracting noises like coughing, wristwatch alarms, unwrapping candy (which you recall is supposed to be consumed outside of the theatre), and cellular phones.
- We also remain seated for the entire performance, until the performers take their final bows. The exception to this rule is when there is an intermission. You will know when it is OK to leave your seat, when the house lights (i.e., the lights in the seating area) come back on.
- The exception to the rule about being quiet is when we applaud at the end of the show. We applaud the performers as a way of showing them how much we enjoyed the show. If you enjoyed the show, you can let them know by clapping loudly.

Finally, some words of advice, to help make the trip to the theatre a smooth one:

- You should always arrive at the theatre with time to get comfortably seated. Generally, thirty minutes prior to curtain time should provide plenty of time for even large groups to find seating.
- If you are attending with a large group, we recommend that you distribute tickets to your group prior to arriving at the theatre.

ABOUT THE OPERA YOU WILL BE SEEING . . .

A Dinner Engagement was the first and most popular opera composed by Sir Lennox Berkeley. A prolific composer and master of all aspects of his craft, Berkeley was a teacher for many years at the Royal Academy of Music in London. The libretto is by Paul Dehn, who went on to become an extremely successful screenwriter.

A Dinner Engagement was commissioned by the English Opera Group, and was first performed in Jubilee Hall, Aldeburgh on June 27, 1954, as part of the Aldeburgh Festival.

A Dinner Engagement centres on Lord and Lady Dunmow, aristocrats who have fallen on hard times in the post-war years. Their dinner guests in their modest Chelsea home are the Grand Duchess of the country of Montebianco and her bachelor son, Prince Philippe – who they hope will fall in love with their daughter, Susan. Dehn's libretto and the interaction of the characters produce observant social comedy.

Synopsis

The opera opens with Lord and Lady Dunmow making preparations for a dinner party. The Dunmows are English aristocrats who have fallen on hard times after the War. Helping with the preparations is their part-time servant – they can no longer afford full-time servants – Mrs. Kneebone.

This dinner party is to be a very special event. Their dinner guests will be the Grand Duchess of the country of Montebianco and her bachelor son, Prince Philippe – who they hope will fall in love with their daughter, Susan. Before the War, Lord Dunmow had served as the Envoy Extraordinary to Montebianco. Mrs. Kneebone has read about the visit to England of the Grand Duchess of Montebianco and her son, but is taken aback to hear that they are to be the Dunmows' dinner guests!

Amid the preparations, the Dunmows and Mrs. Kneebone are interrupted by Susan. Lord and Lady Dunmow voice their disappointment that Susan has not worn the lipstick and the dress they have bought her and Susan becomes aware of their plan to marry her off to Prince Philippe. Mrs. Kneebone recalls press descriptions of the Prince and Lord and Lady Dunmow

explain how much it would help the family finances if Susan were to marry him – although Lady Dunmow admits that they have not seen him since he was a quiet little boy with a great love for food.

As Susan leaves to make herself ready, the others finish preparing the main course, MontebLANcan tomatoes. When dinner is finally placed in the oven, Lord and Lady Dunmow swap their aprons for decorations and jewels. Susan returns in a temper, with too much make-up and her dress awry. The confusion only grows when smoke begins to trickle from the oven door. At the worst possible moment, Susan declares that she will not wear the dress and will not marry the Prince – just as the Prince arrives at the door. Susan rushes away, and amid all the confusion the Grand Duchess makes her entrance.

As the Dunmows and the Grand Duchess become reacquainted, the Dunmows reminisce about their former leisured life and contrast it with their current situation.

The Dunmows tell the Prince that the young woman he saw on his arrival was a servant, going on to blame her for having ruined the entrée. The Grand Duchess offers a gift of MontebLANcan pâté de foie gras as an alternative, and makes light of the absence of the Melba toast, which Lord Dunmow had misplaced.

Lord and Lady Dunmow invite their guests to view their garden and the Grand Duchess accepts, but the Prince – a gourmet -- prefers to remain in the kitchen. As the rest of the party steps outside, he begins to inspect the kitchen.

Susan returns and introduces herself and the two begin chatting about recipes. Susan invites the Prince to taste her bottled cherries. The Prince approves of these and of Susan's interest in making cold cherry soup. Checking the oven to inspect the fate of the MontebLANcan tomatoes, they discover that the smoke came only from Lord Dunmow's mislaid Melba toast.

Returning suddenly from the garden, the Grand Duchess finds the couple together. She orders her son to kiss Susan and expresses her satisfaction with his choice of a bride. Mrs. Kneebone announces that dinner is served and everyone leaves the kitchen as the new couple share a quiet moment together.

THE COMPOSER

Sir Lennox Berkeley

Sir Lennox Berkeley was born at Boar's Hill, Oxford, in 1903 into an aristocratic family. He spent his childhood at Oxford and his early musical influences included his father's collection of piano rolls, a god-mother who had studied singing in Paris, and an aunt who was a composer.

In 1922, Berkeley went to Merton College, Oxford. On graduating in 1926, he had the opportunity to show some of his scores to Ravel, at whose suggestion, he moved to Paris to study with Nadia Boulanger. Berkeley spent five years studying with Boulanger, during which he also met many of the great figures of twentieth-century music including Stravinsky, Fauré, Francaix and Poulenc. He was strongly influenced by Fauré, Ravel, and Stravinsky and his style became firmly oriented towards a French logic, precision and clarity, rather than towards an English romanticism or modalism.

After Boulanger, the next landmark in his career was his meeting Benjamin Britten at the Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music in Barcelona in 1936. They immediately collaborated on the orchestral suite, *Mont Juic*, and became close friends.

During the Second World War Berkeley worked at the BBC in London as an orchestral programme builder and it was there that he met his wife, Elisabeth Freda Bernstein. They were married in 1946 and their extremely happy domestic life became the ideal background for Berkeley's creative work.

From 1946 to 1968 Berkeley was a Professor of Composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London. His pupils included David Bedford, Richard Rodney Bennett, William Mathias, Nicholas Maw and John Tavener. They have all paid tribute to his sensitive guidance and personal generosity.

Berkeley developed a distinctive style within the traditional idiom. His most characteristic features are a textural lightness and lucidity, a harmonic piquancy, an eighteenth-century galanterie, and a thematic brevity. These qualities are more effectively realized in more intimate forms than in the large structures -- in chamber operas such as *A Dinner Engagement* and particularly in songs and chamber music.

Berkeley's honours included the Cobbett Medal (1962); the Ordre de Merit Culturel from Monaco

(1967); an Honorary D.Mus. from Oxford (1970) and an Honorary Fellowship of Merton College (1974); the Papal Knighthood of St. Gregory (1973); Knighthood (1974); President of Honour, the Performing Right Society (1975-83); Honorary Professor, Keele University (1976-79); Honorary Fellow, The Royal Northern College of Music (1975); President of the Cheltenham Festival (1977-83); Honorary Member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1980); Honorary Member, Guildhall School of Music and Drama (1980); Honorary Member, Academie Royale, Belgium (1983); Honorary D.Mus., City University (1983).

As a man, Berkeley was universally loved and as a composer, premieres of his works were notable events in British music for almost fifty years.

Berkeley died in London on December 26, 1989, after suffering from Alzheimer's disease. He left a great legacy of musical compositions, having produced no fewer than 226 works, including fine examples of music for the theatre, the concert hall, church and home. There are four symphonies; concertos for cello, flute, guitar, piano and violin; string quartets; piano pieces; four operas, a ballet, film and incidental music; Mass settings and other sacred music; and songs.

In all, he wrote four operas — the grand opera, *Nelson, Op.41*; a one-act comedy, *A Dinner Engagement, Op.45*; a biblical tableau, *Ruth, Op.50*, and a one-act treatment of the story of Odysseus and Nausicaa, *Castaway, Op.68*. *A Dinner Engagement* was his first opera and his most successful. In the brilliant writing of Dehn's libretto, Berkeley found the perfect foil. The short-winded, ridiculous plot ideally suited Berkeley's style and the result was a highly successful comic opera. *A Dinner Engagement* is staged regularly and its sophisticated wit invariably pleases audiences.

THE LITTLE OPERA COMPANY

Since 1995, the Little Opera Company has had the privilege of producing operas showcasing the significant talents of local singers, musicians and artisans. Our productions have appealed to seasoned and novice audiences alike, in Winnipeg and, on occasion, to its surrounding communities. The journey over these past years has not always been easy, but from the response of our audience members and the success that a number of our

performers have experienced, it has been worth the effort.

The Little Opera Company is a not-for-profit charitable organization, whose mission is the promotion of opera and the promotion of the talented artists that contribute to the production of opera in Winnipeg. Appealing to seasoned and novice audiences alike, our productions explore less known historic works and some of the rich twentieth century repertoire that is often more accessible to new audiences.

Our purpose is as much about developing artists as it is about staging operatic works. The Little Opera Company:

- develops emerging vocalists and instrumentalists, providing coaching and practical experience within the context of its productions
- provides opportunities for artists and artisans to advance their skills in the design of costumes, sets and lighting
- develops production personnel, by providing opportunities to assist in productions

The Little Opera Company offers its audience a unique opportunity to experience chamber opera in English, and to experience opera that engages individuals of diverse backgrounds. We are committed to selecting repertoire that not only provides accessible entertainment for individuals who are new to the genre, but that is also a refreshing and educational foray into realms of opera not frequently explored within our community.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON OPERA

Why Opera?

"To be completely and comprehensively educated means having a background in the arts. By introducing students to opera, we build and sustain cultural intelligence. ... Passing on knowledge and understanding about the power of opera to communicate universal themes, ideas and emotions ultimately enhances and betters our society. ... [Opera] stretches students and teachers in directions they never thought possible."

--Dr. Joseph Piro, New York City Public Schools

What is Opera?

(from the Arizona Opera)

An opera is a musical drama or comedy where the actors sing rather than speak their lines. *Opera* is derived from the Italian word *opus*, which means "work of art".

An opera tells a story. It can come from many sources, including history, current events, the Bible, fairy tales, legends, literature and poetry. Opera can be funny, sad, scary, dramatic, mysterious, imagiary, or a combination of the above.

Opera is a combination of many art forms: singing, orchestral music, acting, dancing, mime, costumes, scenic design and painting, lighting, and makeup design.

The *Libretto* contains all of the words of an opera. The *Librettist* is the person who writes the words for the opera.

The *Composer* writes the music for the opera. All of the music, both vocal (for singers) and orchestral (for instrumentalists) is written in the *score*. The score should reflect the mood, events, and emotions of the characters in the story.

An opera is structured like a play, with acts, scenes, and a variety of vocal forms including *Arias* (solos), *Ensembles* (for 2 or more singers), and *Chorus* (for a large group of singers).

The Performers

The *Soprano* is the highest female voice. This is usually the heroine of the opera and most of the time she is in love with the tenor. A star soprano is often referred to as the "Prima Donna."

A *Mezzo-Soprano* is the second highest, or middle, female voice. The mezzo voice typically has a darker, warmer voice than the soprano.

Alto - also called *Contralto*, this is the lowest female voice. The alto often portrays an old woman, who can either be wise and good or an old witch.

Tenor - this is the highest male voice. The tenor is usually the hero of the opera and is generally in love with the soprano.

Baritone - this is the next lowest, or middle, male voice. The baritone is often a villain but can sometimes be a hero who sacrifices himself for the tenor and/or soprano. In a comedy, the Baritone is usually the one pulling all kinds of pranks. The Baritone is often in love with the soprano but usually loses her to the tenor.

Bass is the lowest of the male voices. He very often plays a wise old man or a comic character.

Supernumeraries (or "Supers") appear on stage in costume in non-singing and non-speaking roles.

The *Orchestra* is the group of instrumentalists who accompany the singers. They play under the stage, in the orchestra pit, where they will be less likely to

cover the singers' voices and detract attention from the performers on stage.

The *Chorus* is a group of singers who function as a unit on stage. Choruses can be for mixed voices, men only, women only, or children. They are usually featured in crowd scenes where they can represent townspeople, soldiers, pilgrims, etc.

Dancers are often included in an opera. They are usually part of large crowd scenes but can be featured in solo roles as well. Many operas include a ballet.

Opera Production

Where do you start if you want to put on a production of an opera? Usually the *General Director*, *Artistic Director* or *Music Director* will pick the repertoire. The performance is conceived by the Production Team, which consists of the *Production Manager*, *Music Director/Conductor*, *Stage Director*, *Choreographer*, *Scene Designer*, *Costume Designer*, and *Lighting Designer*. These people meet frequently to trade ideas and work together to ensure a cohesive interpretation of the piece, from a visual, dramatic, and musical standpoint.

The *Production Manager* oversees and coordinates the efforts of the Production Team, and manages the business aspects of the production.

The *Music Director* is responsible for the interpretation of the score. The Music Director is also usually the *Conductor*, who is responsible for the musical interpretation and coordination of the performance.

The *Stage Director* (sometimes simply called *Director*) is responsible for the overall look of the production. The *Choreographer* designs the movement for the dancers.

The *Costume Designer* designs and creates the clothes that the characters wear. They try to pick designs that reflect the characters and their significance in the story.

The *Scenic Designer* creates the ideas for the visual background of the production. He or she must create detailed blueprints and models of the sets and be sure that the scenery fits in the stage area.

The *Lighting Designer* creates a lighting plan that emphasizes the drama of the moment. Lighting design is an important visual element that contributes to the ambiance of the stage setting and affects the appearance of people, costumes and props on stage.

The *Stage Manager* runs the visual elements of a show during the performance. They are responsible for calling all of the cues for the performance to the crew. This means that they must follow hundreds of detailed

notes in the score and tell the crew when to change lighting, scenery, sound effects, and raise or lower the curtain.

The *Crew* works behind the scenes and is responsible for setting up and running all of the equipment for a performance, including changing sets, props, running the lights, curtains, trap doors, sound effects, and assisting performers with costumes and makeup.

What makes an opera?

Opera is a musical form. The orchestra provides the overriding musical texture, while the singers are featured as soloists.

The *overture* is a piece of music played by the orchestra to begin the opera.

A *recitative* is the sung narrative which propels the action of the story.

An *aria* is a solo number for a singer. This comes from the Italian word meaning "tune" or "song". This is usually where the character expresses their feelings about a situation.

An *ensemble* is sung by two or more people. Two people singing is called a *duet*, three people singing is called a *trio*, four people are a *quartet*, and so on.

Choral scenes usually feature the principal and secondary cast members and the chorus. The sheer number of voices on stage is usually reserved for moments of high drama and spectacle. Dancers might also be featured in a big choral scene.

Operas are often performed in a foreign language (usually the language for which they were originally written). Even if you cannot understand the language, you can usually get a good idea of what is happening from the music and the actions of the characters. You will note however that The Little Opera Company's productions are sung in English.

Props, or "*Stage Properties*," are visual elements of the scene rather than actually being part of the set. Small props that are picked up and carried by performers are called "hand props." These can include fans, knives, candlesticks, books, magic lanterns, etc. Larger items, such as pieces of furniture or paintings, are called "set props."

Scenery or *sets* provide the visual background for the story. Sets can reflect the locale, historical circumstances of the plot, and reflect the overall interpretation and conception of the opera as determined by the production team. They are conceived by the Scene Designer and executed, or

built, by the Technical Crew under the guidance of the Technical Director.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Activities for Language Arts and Drama Students

- Write a review of the performance. Some ideas for what you might write about could include:
 - What was your overall impression of the performance? How did it make you feel?
 - What made the performance special for you?
 - What would you have liked to have seen done differently?
 - Who were the major characters in the opera? Which were your favourites, and why?
- Share your review with the class. Your class can even assemble all the reviews in a package and send them to The Little Opera Company! (c/o 234 Yale Avenue, Winnipeg, MB, Canada, R3M 0L9).
- Is there a moral to the story? What ethical dilemma(s) does the story portray?
- Think about all of the people who work behind the scenes. Do you understand what they do? What do you think the opera would be like if there were no sets or special lighting or specially designed costumes?

Activities for Music Students

- Share your favorite moment of the opera and discuss how the music was important for that particular moment. Do you have a favourite song of your own (not from the opera) that you think would be appropriate for that moment, which you could share with the class?

GLOSSARY

Accompanist: Someone (as a pianist) who plays an instrumental or vocal part designed to support or complement a melody.

Aria: A musical work usually found in an opera or oratorio, which generally dwells on a single emotional theme of one of the characters.

Baritone: A low male singing voice between tenor and bass.

Bass: 1. The lowest male singing voice, below baritone. 2. The lowest part in a piece of music. 3. The lowest instrument in a musical work. 4. In the violin family, the lowest instrument.

Comic Opera: An opera with light-natured music, comedy, and a happy ending, in contrast to grand opera.

Duet: A composition for two performers.

Falsetto: A high, light, artificial voice used to sing notes that are above the normal register.

Grand Opera: Opera on a large scale, usually entirely sung, in contrast to comic opera.

Harmony: The sound resulting from the simultaneous sounding of two or more tones consonant with each other.

Libretto: The text (lyrics and any spoken parts) of an opera or oratorio.

Lyric: The words to a song.

Melody: An arrangement of single tones in a meaningful sequence

Mezzo-soprano: A woman's voice with a range between that of the soprano and contralto.

Notation: Written music indicating pitch and rhythm.

Octave: An interval eight diatonic scale degrees above it. Two notes an octave apart have the same letter name, and form the most consonant interval possible.

Opera: A musical play, usually entirely sung, making use of costumes, staging, props, sets, and dramatic elements. Operas usually consist of two types of musical elements, the aria, which primarily expresses a single idea or theme, and the recitative which advances the story.

Operetta: A light opera.

Oratorio: Operatic works without staging, sets, or elaborate costumes that is usually performed in a more relaxed setting than a formal opera, and that usually has a religious theme.

Orchestration: The art of arranging, writing or scoring music for an orchestra.

Overture: The introductory music for an opera, ballet, or oratorio.

Quartet: A musical composition for four instruments or voices.

Recitative: A musical work usually found in an opera or oratorio, which mimics the patterns of speech, in order to advance the story.

Soprano: The highest female vocal range, above alto.

Staff: The five horizontal lines upon which music is written, usually including a clef, and having a time signature and key signature.

Tenor: 1. A high male voice between alto and baritone. 2. Instruments in the tenor range.

Time Signature: The numbers written on staff of any piece, indicating which type of note gets a single beat, and how many beats are in each measure.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE MATERIALS

- *The Music of Lennox Berkeley*, by Peter Dickinson, *Boydell Press*; April 2003, ISBN-10: 0851159362; ISBN-13: 978-0851159362
- *Lennox Berkeley: A Source Book*, by Stewart R. Craggs, *Ashgate Publishing*, February 1999, ISBN-10: 0859679330 ISBN-13: 978-0859679336
- *Lennox and Freda*, by Tony Scotland, *Michael Russell Publishing Ltd.*, November 2010, ISBN-10: 0859553191 ISBN-13: 978-0859553193
- *Opera : A Research and Information Guide (2nd Edition)*, by Guy A. Marco, *Garland Publishing*; 2nd edition, January, 2001, ISBN: 0815335164
- *Opera 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Opera*, by Fred Plotkin, Placido Domingo, *Hyperion*, 1st ed, 1994, ISBN: 0786880252
- *A Short History of Opera, Fourth Edition*, by Donald Jay Grout, Hermine Weigel Williams, *Columbia University Press*, August 2003, ISBN 10: 0231119585