

Programme Notes

Royal figures in opera are rarely remote emblems of power. Composers place them at the point where public duty and private feeling collide: love becomes policy, marriage becomes succession, and a personal decision can alter a kingdom. These notes follow the concert's journey from heroic legend and antiquity to Shakespeare, the Tudors, fairy tale and history.

Come If You Dare

Henry Purcell *King Arthur*

Purcell's 1691 semi-opera combines spoken drama with music, dance and spectacle. In *King Arthur*, "Come if you dare" is a rousing challenge from the Saxons to the Britons, propelled by trumpets, crisp rhythms and answering voices. Our royal gathering treats the challenge rather more playfully—with something of the atmosphere of Ascot on race day or a particularly grand tennis party. Amid the elegance, excitement and friendly rivalry, our singers invite the audience to meet this formidable collection of queens and kings... if you dare!

Bella etade avventurosa

Johann Adolf Hasse *Marc'Antonio e Cleopatra*

Hasse's serenata was first performed in Naples in 1725, with a libretto by Francesco Ricciardi. It looks back to the aftermath of Actium in 31 BCE, when Octavian's victory destroyed the political and personal alliance of Cleopatra and Marc Antonio. Rather than staging the battle, the work concentrates on the lovers' final hours and on the tension between courage, tenderness and approaching death. In this duet, their heroic language is warmed by Hasse's lyrical Italian style: public figures become two people attempting to hold fast to love as history closes around them.

Io già t'amai

George Frideric Handel *Rodelinda*

Handel's *Rodelinda*, written for London in 1725, is a drama of dynastic seizure, marital fidelity and political reversal. Grimoaldo has usurped the Lombard throne from Bertarido and is torn between his betrothal to Eduige and his desire for Bertarido's queen, Rodelinda. In 'Io già t'amai', he turns on Eduige, claiming that his former love has been extinguished by her contempt. Handel's vocal line makes political instability personal: wounded pride, authority and vulnerability coexist in a ruler whose possession of the crown has not brought security.

Ho perduto il caro sposo

George Frideric Handel *Rodelinda*

Rodelinda, regina de' Longobardi believes her husband, King Bertarido, to be dead, while the usurper Grimoaldo attempts to force her into marriage. In "Ho perduto il caro sposo", her grief is inseparable from her fidelity to both husband and crown. The aria's apparent simplicity gives the voice room to reveal successive shades of sorrow, particularly when the opening music returns. Handel presents a queen deprived of political power yet commanding in moral authority: Rodelinda refuses to surrender her memory, her identity or her allegiance.

Sempre a te sarò fedele

Christoph Willibald Gluck *Paride ed Elena*

Gluck's 1770 opera concerns the love of Paris and Helen before the Trojan War. The god Amore guides events, and the drama is concerned less with warfare than with persuasion, hesitation and desire. Gluck's reform ideals favoured clarity of text and dramatic purpose over display for its own sake. In this trio, vows of fidelity are heard against the audience's knowledge of what the lovers' union will unleash. The graceful classical surface therefore carries an undertow of historical catastrophe.

Brindisi

Giuseppe Verdi *Macbeth*

Verdi's first Shakespeare opera was created for Florence in 1847 and substantially revised for Paris in 1865. Lady Macbeth's drinking song belongs to the banquet at which Macbeth sees the ghost of the murdered Banquo. The guests hear a poised public entertainment; Macbeth and the audience experience a scene coming apart. Verdi uses the brilliance of the brindisi as dramatic camouflage. Lady Macbeth repeatedly attempts to restore ceremony and control, but the returning refrain only sharpens the contrast between courtly display and guilty terror.

Pietà rispetto amore

Giuseppe Verdi *Macbeth*

Near the end of the opera, Macbeth confronts the emptiness of the crown he obtained through murder. He may command obedience, but not the 'pity, respect and love' that should accompany old age. Verdi gives him a broad, grave line whose dignity does not erase his crimes. The aria is striking because it offers recognition without absolution: Macbeth understands the human value of what he has destroyed, even as the consequences of his actions close in.

O cruel souvenir

Camille Saint-Saëns *Henry VIII*

Saint-Saëns's grand opera *Henry VIII* was first staged at the Paris Opéra in 1883. Its drama centres on Henry's attempt to end his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn, set against the political break with Rome. Catherine's music often carries the work's deepest moral weight. In 'Ô cruel souvenir!', memory is both consolation and wound: the queen recalls a marriage once believed secure while recognising the machinery of power moving against her. Saint-Saëns combines French declamation with a noble, sustained lyricism suited to Catherine's dignity.

Come innocente giovane

Gaetano Donizetti *Anna Bolena*

Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*, premiered in Milan in 1830, helped establish the composer's international reputation. The opera compresses the fall of Anne Boleyn into an intense drama of suspicion, political expediency and divided loyalties. Anne receives Jane Seymour as an apparently innocent young woman, unaware that Jane is already loved by the king. The scene's bel canto beauty is dramatically double-edged: long lines and blended voices express sympathy and affection while the audience hears the secret that will destroy them both.

Ode of Anne Boleyn

Ladies of the Ensemble

This reflective interlude turns from court confrontation to collective memory. Anne Boleyn has been represented and reimagined for nearly five centuries: as schemer, victim, reformer, romantic heroine and mother of a future queen. Heard after Donizetti's scene, the ode allows the women's voices to step outside a single operatic narrative and contemplate the historical figure left behind by legend.

Prince's aria

Antonín Dvořák *Rusalka*

Dvořák's *Rusalka*, premiered in Prague in 1901, draws on Central European water-spirit traditions and the nineteenth-century literary fairy tale. A prince falls in love with the mysterious Rusalka but cannot sustain the bond between their worlds. His aria is ardent and sensuous, yet the musical setting suggests that human desire is moving through an enchanted landscape it does not fully understand. The prince's attraction to the unknown becomes both the promise and the danger of the story.

Hymn to the Sun

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov *The Golden Cockerel*

Rimsky-Korsakov's final opera, completed in 1907, is a satirical fairy tale about foolish rule, militarism and self-deception. Queen Shemakha appears before the hapless King Dodon with an irresistible hymn to the rising sun. Her elaborate, gleaming vocal writing is both enchantment and strategy. She seems to belong to the exotic world imagined by the court, yet she controls the scene completely. Beauty here is a political force, exposing a ruler who confuses appetite with authority.

Der alte Sturm Wo in Bergen du dich birgst

Richard Wagner *Die Walküre*

In Act II of *Die Walküre*, Wotan is confronted by Fricka, guardian of marriage and queen of the gods. She demands punishment for the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde, whose love violates both marriage and kinship. Wotan greets the encounter as ‘the old storm, the old trouble’, but Fricka’s argument is neither a tantrum nor a merely domestic complaint. She exposes the contradiction in his plans: the supposedly free hero on whom he relies has been shaped by Wotan himself. As the scene unfolds, Fricka’s legal and moral logic defeats the ruler of the gods and forces him to abandon his chosen champion.

Das Fest beginnt and Brautlied

Albert Lortzing *Zar und Zimmermann*

Lortzing’s 1837 comic opera follows Peter the Great working incognito in a Dutch shipyard to learn Western techniques. Confusion ensues because another Russian worker is also named Peter. The festive ensemble ‘Das Fest beginnt’ and the ‘Brautlied’ draw their energy from public celebration, mistaken identity and the collision of ordinary life with concealed power. Lortzing’s spoken dialogue and tuneful ensembles belong to the German Spieloper tradition, where political figures can be treated with a lightness that sharpens rather than erases the satire.

Nocturne

Emmanuel Chabrier *Le roi malgré lui*

Chabrier’s 1887 opéra comique concerns Henri de Valois, elected King of Poland but longing to escape his unwanted throne and return to France. The plot is deliberately intricate; the score is prized for its harmonic colour, rhythmic wit and orchestral imagination. The Nocturne suspends the bustle in an atmosphere of lyrical stillness. Its elegance offers a different image of monarchy: not command or ceremony, but private feeling glimpsed amid a political farce.

Preghiera

Gaetano Donizetti *Maria Stuarda*

In Donizetti’s 1835 opera, Mary Stuart awaits execution after her fatal rivalry with Elizabeth I. The concluding prayer gathers Mary and her supporters into a public act of faith. Bel canto line becomes communal utterance: the solo voice rises from and returns to the ensemble, while restraint intensifies rather than diminishes emotion. The scene closes the concert with a queen deprived of earthly power yet granted musical sovereignty, meeting death with composure and drawing those around her into her final vision.