

BENJAMIN BRITTEN • A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM • 1960

A Dream at Aldeburgh

The world premiere under the composer's direction

The year 2026 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Benjamin Britten's death, an apt moment to return to one of the most immediately beguiling of his stage works. A *Midsummer Night's Dream* was written with unusual speed between the autumn of 1959 and spring of 1960 for the reopening of Aldeburgh's refurbished Jubilee Hall. Britten and Peter Pears fashioned their own libretto from Shakespeare, reducing five acts to three and cutting roughly half the original text while adding almost nothing of their own. The result is remarkably faithful in spirit, yet unmistakably Britten: not Shakespeare with incidental music, but a wholly independent operatic dream-world.

From the opening string glissandos, the forest seems to breathe. Britten distinguishes its inhabitants through sharply individual musical colours. The fairies inhabit a brilliant, uncanny world of harps, keyboards, percussion and high woodwind; the lovers are given warmer and more conventionally lyrical textures; the Mechanicals arrive with the earthy weight and comic pomposity of lower wind and brass. Above them all floats Oberon, written for Alfred Deller's countertenor, a voice still startlingly unfamiliar on the operatic stage in 1960. Britten turns that unusual timbre into dramatic substance: Oberon sounds as though he belongs neither to the mortal world nor quite to conventional opera.

The first performance took place at the Jubilee Hall on 11 June 1960, with Britten conducting the English Opera Group Orchestra and John Cranko directing. The cast reads today like a roll-call of Britten's closest theatrical collaborators. Deller created Oberon opposite Jennifer Vyvyan's dazzling Tityania, a role Britten wrote specifically for her. George Maran, Thomas Hemsley, Marjorie Thomas and April Cantelo formed the quartet of bewildered lovers; Forbes Robinson and Johanna Peters were Theseus and Hippolyta. Owen Brannigan brought his incomparable comic authority to Bottom, while Peter Pears, unusually far from the centre of a Britten opera, revelled in the deliciously absurd role of Flute and his transformation into Thisbe.

Critical reaction was lively rather than unanimous. Britten's score was widely admired for its colour, atmosphere and extraordinary theatrical assurance, although aspects of Cranko's staging attracted reservations. The American critic Howard Taubman, reporting from Aldeburgh, recognised the work's exceptional appeal and predicted a wide future for it. That judgement proved sound. The opera reached Covent Garden the following year, directed by John Gielgud, and has since become one of Britten's most frequently performed stage works. Its durability lies partly in its refusal to turn Shakespeare's comedy into mere prettiness. The forest can shimmer, but it can also menace; erotic confusion, cruelty and irrationality are never far beneath the enchantment.

This first-performance recording preserves something no later studio account can reproduce: the sense of a new work discovering itself before an audience, under the composer's own hand. There is freshness in the pacing, a wonderful responsiveness between stage and pit, and an immediacy to the characterisation that makes the comedy sparkle without disturbing the nocturnal spell.

The BBC engineering is remarkably fine for its period. Voices are naturally balanced, orchestral detail survives with surprising clarity, and the acoustic of the intimate Jubilee Hall is caught with warmth rather than congestion. In these new *Pristine XR Ambient Stereo* remasters the recording opens out quite beautifully. The added spatial perspective is subtle, preserving the focus and integrity of the original while allowing Britten's extraordinary orchestral palette to breathe. Harps, percussion, celesta, strings and voices acquire a luminous depth that is particularly effective in this score. The result is not merely impressive for 1960: it is genuinely gorgeous, and at its best quite entrancing.

Sixty-six years after that June evening in Aldeburgh, and fifty years after Britten's death, the *Dream* has lost none of its strange radiance. Few operas move so effortlessly between comedy, sensuality, unease and wonder. Fewer still sound so completely themselves from the very first bar.

PRISTINE XR AMBIENT STEREO REMASTER

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

OP. 64

WORLD PREMIERE

Recorded in the Jubilee Hall,
Aldeburgh, 11 June 1960

ALFRED DELLER *Oberon*
JENNIFER VYVYAN *Tytania*
FORBES ROBINSON *Theseus*
JOHANNA PETERS *Hippolyta*
GEORGE MARAN *Lysander*
THOMAS HEMSLEY *Demetrius*
MARJORIE THOMAS *Hermia*
APRIL CANTELO *Helena*
OWEN BRANNIGAN *Bottom*
PETER PEARS *Flute*

ENGLISH OPERA GROUP ORCHESTRA
BENJAMIN BRITTEN



