

Georges Bizet's opera, *La Jolie Fille de Perth*, premiered at the Théâtre-Lyrique Impérial du Châtelet in Paris in 1867. The opera is very loosely based on Sir Walter Scott's novel, *The Fair Maid of Perth*, but with many character changes to improve the dramatic tension for the stage. At first glance the opera is full of stock characters that pepper other operas, the lovesick Henry Smith (see *L'Elisir d'Amore*), the flighty Catherine who briefly loses her mind (see *Lucia di Lammermoor*), a rakish aristocrat set on sexual conquest (see *Rigoletto* or *Le nozze di Figaro*), and a meddling gypsy (see *Il Trovatore*). While the opera loses some of Scott's subtlety in favour of melodrama, with plenty of instances of mistaken identity and characters assuming the worst, it does at least have a happy ending for the principal couple. What shines through is Bizet's lyricism and his ability to write tuneful and engaging music for a wide audience.

Sir Thomas Beecham's penchant for French opera is well known. During his wartime stint at the Metropolitan Opera in New York he mainly conducted French works, including *Carmen*, *Faust*, *Manon*, *Louise*, *Mignon* and *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. His affinity for this particular opera lasted for decades. He conducted the British premiere in Manchester in 1917 to an enthusiastic reception from the Manchester Guardian: "*The Fair Maid of Perth* is a striking example of the modesty of genius... there is scarcely a bar of poor music in the opera." The Observer, reviewing a later London performance was more circumspect, suggesting that Beecham's long love affair with French opera was the main reason for his championing a somewhat obscure opera.

After the war Beecham was operationally homeless, no longer in charge of designing the 'International Seasons' that had been such a sensation at Covent Garden in the 1930s. While Beecham continued an extensive concert career, the studios of BBC radio provided him with an opportunity to continue to conduct opera, and this time to a nationwide audience. In the late 1940s Beecham conducted radio performances of *La Damnation de Faust* (1946 & 1949), *Tristan und Isolde* (1946), *Die Walküre* (1946), *Les Troyens* (1947), *Elektra* (1947), *Les Deux Journées* (1947), *A Village Romeo and Juliet* (1948), and *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1949 in English). In 1956 Beecham returned to conduct *The Fair Maid of Perth* for the BBC, again in English but with an almost entirely different cast from seven years previously.

American coloratura soprano Mattiilda Dobbs sings Catherine Glover. Dobbs made her name in Europe in the early 1950s. In addition to singing at Covent Garden, La Scala and the Vienna State Opera, she was the first black singer to gain a long-term contract with the Metropolitan Opera in 1956.

Alexander Young, singing Henry Smith, made his professional debut under Beecham at the Edinburgh Festival in 1950 singing a minor role in Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Young had a wide repertoire, from Mozart and Handel, through Gilbert and Sullivan operettas to new operas such as Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* - an opera he recorded with the composer conducting in 1964.

The rest of the cast includes Scottish bass David Ward, singing Ralph, who would later go on to be a renowned Wotan in the Covent Garden Ring Cycles of the 1960s and 1970s, and Owen Brannigan, the only survivor from the 1949 broadcast, as Simon Glover. Brannigan is perhaps known today for his roles in Britten operas such as Swallow in *Peter Grimes*, Noye in *Noye's Fludde*, and Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Several of these roles were specifically written by Britten for Brannigan to sing.

Beecham conducts with all the deftness and joy we expect from him, giving music he clearly thought was unjustly neglected, a fresh lease of life.

# bizet

the fair maid of perth

PACO 227

mattiwilda dobbs  
alexander young  
kevin miller  
david ward  
anna pollack  
owen brannigan

bbc chorus  
royal philharmonic orchestra

conducted by sir thomas beecham

broadcast recording, 1956

Pristine  
XR

disc one  
(73:14)

1. Prelude (6:02)
- ACT ONE
2. Que notre enclume (4:15)
3. Enfin, me voilà seul! (5:23)
4. Vive l'hiver (2:13)
5. Ces plaisirs là ne me vont pas (1:29)
6. Deux mots, encor (4:46)
7. C'est dans cette maison (6:59)
8. Que fait ici cette inconnue? (2:36)
9. Vous voudrez bien, je pense (3:55)

- ACT TWO
10. Bons citoyens (2:48)
11. Carnaval! (1:56)
12. Musiciens, danseurs (1:47)
13. Tout boit, amis (1:39)
14. Sans crainte approchez-vous (0:45)
15. La la la (2:39)
16. Je donne en mon palais (1:48)
17. Les seigneurs de la cour (2:51)
18. Tu seras mon bon ange (2:41)
19. Partout des cris de joie (6:08)
20. La la la ... Quand la flamme de l'amour (5:21)
21. Eh! Camarade... (5:13)

disc two  
(61:25)

- ACT THREE
1. Entr'acte et scène - Je fais cent pièces d'or! (1:42)
2. Elle sortait de sa demeure (3:12)
3. Et tenez... écoutez... (1:59)
4. Nous voilà seuls (4:58)
5. Ballet (1:54)
6. C'est donc ici (3:33)
7. Et bien, cette beauté (12:49)

- ACT FOUR
8. Smith, tu nous connais tous (7:31)
9. Ils verront si je mens! (6:07)
10. Maître là-bas on vous attend (2:25)
11. Aux premiers rayons du matin (3:36)
12. Catherine Glover? (1:19)
13. Ah ... Echo, viens sur l'air embaumé (3:50)
14. Le jour de la Saint Valentin Henri Smith est mort! (6:29)

PRISTINE  
AUDIO

PACO 227

CAST

Catherine Glover - Mattiwilda Dobbs  
Henry Smith - Alexander Young  
Le Duc de Rothsay - Kevin Miller  
Ralph - David Ward  
Mab - Anna Pollack  
Simon Glover - Owen Brannigan

BBC Chorus  
(Chorus-Master, Leslie Woodgate)  
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra  
(Leader, Arthur Leavins)  
conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham

Libretto by Saint-Georges  
and Adenis after the novel  
by Sir Walter Scott

English translation  
by Paul England

XR remastered by  
Andrew Rose

First broadcast on the  
BBC Third Programme,  
Friday, 5th October, 1956

Total duration: 2hr 14:39

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