

## **The Wildman** *The making of an Opera – an afterword*

In June 1991 Kevin Crossley-Holland and I re-visited Orford Castle. Only the Keep is standing, last relic of Henry II 's splendid fortress. Together we gazed down into the dungeon: the very place where the Wildman was kept, eight hundred years ago. We stood in the hall where Sir Bartholomew de Glanville gave his orders, challenging that aged and mutinous Earl, Hugh Bigod. We climbed up to the roof and looked out across the marshes to the sea: there, in those cold grey waters, fishermen trawled up a wild man in their nets. The wide horizon, expanse of light, windswept saltings of East Anglia: very familiar territory to Kevin and myself, from earliest childhood. Landscape of Cotman and Crome, of Crabbe and Skelton; it was the backdrop to a dialogue which continues to this day: who was the wild man? what does he become now, as we make him anew?

As the story grew, so the sound world began to take over my imagination. Scribbled in the back of my diary are the first certainties: flute, oboe, horn and trumpet, two cellos, percussion and harp. The timbres were unmistakable — though three years later the strings had grown, the clarinet would not be left out, and economic constraints had transfigured the harp.

In the spring of 1992 I was finishing my opera on Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. and my 'inner ear' was at its most acute. With great clarity I began to hear the new opera emerging from the old; it was a strange sensation, maybe like a snake sloughing off its previous skin, for the two soundworlds are quite different. Into the dry, hot world of Lorca's stony plains, into the world of *duende*, came a quiet insistent seeping and lapping; clustrous, refracting chords, voices and instruments blent close together. This was the "sea -music" of *The Wildman*, and though it was not written down until nearly two years later, it never left me, and became the genesis of the opera.

Composing is of necessity the most solitary of activities, and one of the many reasons I love working with opera is that it is dependent on collaboration. Gradually the team expands: conductor and director become drawn into the web the librettist and composer are weaving, and then at last comes the heady period of rehearsal as the cast make the opera their own. In the case of *The Wildman* it was the foresight and tenacity of Sheila Colvin, General Director of the Aldeburgh Foundation, that made everything possible; both she and I believed that the whole performance team should be in place before composition proper began.

One member of the cast, though, was in my mind even before the opera was contracted: Gwion Thomas. I knew from the outset that his was the voice I wanted for the Wildman. From those earliest glimpses of the music of the opera, I knew not only the sound -world of the ensemble, but something of the extraordinary quality I wanted for the voice of this sea-stranger, who comes to land seeking kin and kinship. Gwion was generous with his time and we improvised, together and with Kevin, exploring the Wildman. If the Wildman is a selchie (seal-man) then he is fluid, lithe, sensuous, by repute magnetically

attractive to women, and also with something of androgyny about him. How does this mesh with the lonely young hermit from the marsh, a strange, silent creature of mud and damp, salt and sand? What is the voice of a man tough enough to withstand the North sea winter, yet still carrying within him the memory of the village child he once was? What is the sound world of one who has lived apart from people for so long? What, above all, is the inner voice of one who is mute?

Finding answers to these questions meant much more than endless discussion, reading, experiment, marvellous though that was. It meant a journey into the hinterlands of the imagination. As I began to discover the Wildman's first soliloquies, I found that word and music were inseparable. Words of my own began to mingle with Kevin's in a kind of quarry from which the music emerged; whether a sound was a syllable or note was often irrelevant; in the ambiguity of the Wildman's language, word and music had become one. Thus a continuous flow was established, back and forth between Kevin and myself, as the soliloquies were discovered, refined, revised, and discovered again. As late as summer 1994, when the opera was largely composed, Kevin was finding new syllables for the Wildman's first soliloquy, to fit with the sounds that had finally crystallised musically; and in January 1995, as I completed the fair copy of the full score, we both heard the need for different vowel sounds in the Wildman's last phrases, and altered music and text accordingly.

In composing the Wildman I enjoyed giving myself the opportunity to revisit traditional operatic forms—aria, ensemble, different kinds of recitative—while allowing the opera as a whole to discover a form that was not so traditional: a form appropriate to its elusive subject matter. Like many of my concert works, the opera unfolds on several different planes. Linear narrative, in which events follow one another chronologically, is only one of these planes. In the Wildman, all the singers save the Wildman himself, are present on stage throughout. They are voices, not characters; together with the twelve musicians of the orchestra, these seven voices are outside literal time and place. They are the vehicle by which we may travel into the larger resonance of the particular story. Their words are poetry, not prose; their music at once vocal and instrumental. They carry a thread through the opera, sometimes woven right into the texture, sometimes set apart.

From this 'non-figurative' role each singer steps forth to *become*: thirteen characters are created, with whom we identify, hoping and feeling, laughing and fearing, as we do in any figurative drama. It is a challenge for both composer and singers: for whereas in a play we may be literally deceived by an actor who 'doubles', operatic voices are too easily recognizable for this to happen. Therefore I chose to emphasise the doublings, exploring different colours within one voice. The first soprano, which I wrote for the beautiful voice of Virginia Kerr, has to encompass both Lady Eleanor and Mardle Jane. It's not just a matter of social stereotype—crotchety fisherwoman as opposed to elegant lady; such characterisations hold little interest for me. Rather, it's understanding why the passionate energies of these two women take such a different course and what kinds of vocal expression this gives rise to.

Quiet is the one essential for my place of work, and it was in the West of Ireland in summer 1993 that I found a quiet which acted as the catalyst for detailed composition to begin. The deserted strands offered another catalyst, too, for it was here that I heard that most haunting of sounds, the call of the grey Atlantic seal. One night I notated the seal-call as well as I could: a falling third, decorated intricately with microtonal inflection, its undulating rhythm ebbing like a wave of the sea. I have journeyed far since that night, following the path of the Wildman; but the seal swims there yet.

Nicola LeFanu. © 1995

Kevin Crossley-Holland's libretto for *The Wildman* is published by Boydell and Brewer: The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1995; it includes a slightly longer version of this article.