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The Mountain Sylph: A Forgotten Exemplar of English Romantic
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The Mountain Sylph: A Forgotten Exemplar of English Romantic Opera

R O D N E Y S T E N N I N G E D G E C O M B E

THREE years after his second cousin, Giacomo Meyerbeer, brought *Robert le diable* to the stage in 1831 (at the same time launching the career of the ballerina Marie Taglioni through its spectral ballet), the English composer John Barnett mounted his opera *The Mountain Sylph* at the Lyceum Theatre in London. The libretto, by one T. J. Thackeray, was even more closely connected with Taglioni than Barnett was with Meyerbeer, because it versified the plot of *La sylphide* (1832), the scenario of which tenor Adolphe Nourrit, the first Robert, had devised especially for his balletic costar. Although in his *New Grove* article on Barnett, Nicholas Temperley remarks that Thackeray's libretto derived "from German folklore," this is only partly true.¹ Nourrit had loosely based *La sylphide* on a story by Charles Nodier, *Trilby, ou Le lutin d'Argail* (a Franco-Celtic enterprise, therefore), swapping the genders of the protagonists (a goblin and a fisherman's wife in Nodier; a sprite and a farmer in the ballet). More important, Nourrit reconceived the supernatural figure in terms derived from the Swiss physician Paracelsus and drew on the latter's secondary mythology of the sylph (which probably portmanteaus "nymph" with "sylvestris") instead of the primary figures of fairies or nymphs. And although it is certainly true that German folklore had given Wilis and Loreleis to the worlds of opera and ballet, these sirenic figures willfully *destroy* the men they seduce, a *Schadenfreude* altogether absent from Nourrit's reconception of the heroine. His benign, sportive sylphide has much more in common with the Rosicrucian sylphs in Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock* than with the temptresses in Eichendorff's "Waldgespräch" and Heine's *De l'Allemagne*. The mythology underpinning the ballet and the opera so closely modeled on it is accordingly syncretic — the German element, if present at all, very faint indeed.

It goes without saying that the plots of *La sylphide* and *The Mountain Sylph* are diagrams of the Romantic dilemma first articulated in Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, namely, the self-disqualification of idealists and dreamers from

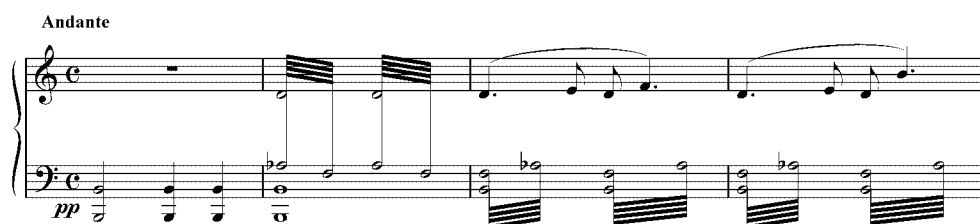
the exigencies of an ordinary life. Nourrit's version precipitates the tragedy potentially present in this opposition when James, a Scottish farmer, abandons his fiancée, Effie, and follows a sylph (unnamed) to her glen in the Highlands. Here, in an effort to possess her, he wraps her in a scarf made by a vengeful witch called Madge. To catch her, however, is to kill her, a moment counterpointed by the backstage wedding procession of the jilted Effie with her new groom, Gurn. In all but the last few details, this summary of Nourrit's scenario matches the plot of *The Mountain Sylph*, an opera oddly named in view of the fact that the heroine can scarcely claim to be an oread. Her *aria di sortita* informs us that she "loves to dwell, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep in a forest dell," an emphatic affinity with depth that scarcely describes a *mountain* sylph's habitat.² In the opera, Aeolia (for so Thackeray names his sylph in homage to the god of the winds) is in love with Donald (*vice* James), who is engaged to Jessie (*vice* Effie), who is coveted in turn by Christie (*vice* Gurn). Madge undergoes a sex change to become the wizard Hela.³

At one crucial point, however, Thackeray parted company with his balletic source and supplied a happy ending as egregious as the one Nahum Tate tacked on to his notorious 1681 adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Whereas in Taglioni's ballet the sylph had died and was bodily assumed (like the Virgin Mary, though apparently lifeless) into an unspecified world above, Thackeray has her snatched by the fiend Ashtaroth (a queasy dip into Philistine theology) and trapped in a "Salamandrine Cavern." He then fumbled together motifs from *Orfeo ed Euridice*, *Die Zauberflöte*, *Oberon*, and Kuhlau's *Lulu* and had James embark on a heroic quest to free Aeolia from sylph-hell. This quest motif has a certain cultural interest, if only because it anticipates the Biedermeier fascination with moral pilgrimage that issued in Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and Schumann's choral cantatas *Der Rose Pilgerfahrt* and *Das Paradies und die Peri*, and because it draws on earlier precedents as well. Just as Tamino has his Three Boys, and Huon his fairy king, so a convenient *dea ex machina* comes to assist Donald in the form of Etheria, the Queen of the Sylphids. She gives him a rose amulet (analogue to the Oberonic horn) to safeguard him on his quest, and ensures his return from the nether region with Aeolia in tow. The latter thereupon turns into a marriageable mortal (which effectively dispels the essence of the ballet scenario), while the chorus intones the *beatus vir* finale typical of eighteenth-century opera, whether it be Da Ponte's "Fortunato l'uom che prende / ogni cosa pel buon verso" in *Così fan tutte*, or Congreve's "Happy, happy shall we be" at the end of *Semele*. Thackeray's particular take on this tired old topos is "virtue triumphs over wrong, might has yielded unto right," and it scarcely reflects the situation on the ground, where Etheria has excelled Hela in *both* power and goodness. This terminal lapse apart, however, the plot has something of the grace and balance of the Nourrit scenario it otherwise follows so carefully, though it is poorly versified — so poorly, indeed, that at points it even veers into incoherence. I can make no sense of "Your scorn of Christie tremble, fear" (41) or "To me what's mortal happiness my fate forbids the hope of plea-

sure” (100), no matter what punctuation I set in place. However, elegantly written (as opposed to shrewdly crafted) libretti are rare on the lyric stage, and a feeble and stilted verbal texture was never in itself enough to scuttle an opera. (If Thackeray’s verse provokes occasional bafflement and frequent shudders, it is because I am a native English speaker; I wouldn’t be at all surprised if native Italian speakers cringe at some of Cammarano’s formulae, or French operagoers at those of Scribe that I cheerfully take in my stride!)

But what of *The Mountain Sylph*’s music? In my opinion, it is patchy, but often rather good, and well deserves a revival in an age interested in novelty and engaged (rather than rendered apoplectic) by lightweight prettiness. In the less tolerant climate of the 1940s, however, Edward Dent damned it without even a breath of faint praise: “The commonplace character of the themes could be forgiven if they had any sort of popular attractiveness, but the construction is generally very amateurish and the music is always coming to a dead stop when it ought to go on.”⁴ Hidden behind these strictures is an unconscious acknowledgment of the very distinctiveness of Barnett’s melodic habit. One could argue that music that “is always coming to a dead stop” is music fashioned from the Meyerbeerian *ligne brisée* and that the undoubtedly bland (if not “commonplace”) character of those melodic components is a function of their provenance in a mosaic rather than a dynamic context.

That mode of composition has its own piquancy, even if one *does* occasionally yearn for a richly nourished melody or two to grow up and flourish among the tesserae; and the overture is an extremely accomplished disposition of such motivic pieces—not at all “amateurish” to my mind. That praise applies not only to the fluency and integration of its parts, but also to the thematic line that their tessellation throws into prominence. Weber and Hérold supplied Barnett with models in this regard, and, as a coherent commentary on, and diagram of, the plot of the ensuing opera, *Sylph*’s overture bears comparison with those of *Oberon* and *Zampa*, however much it might fall short of their melodic vigor and freshness. Unlike *Zampa*, however, which bursts into uncomplicated, racy, diatonic life, and more like *Oberon* and *Hans Heiling* with their mysterious, incantatory horn calls, *Sylph* begins quietly and remotely. After a soft knock of B-naturals that mislead us about our tonal destination—an ambiguity enhanced by a murky tremolo of diminished sevenths—the melody feels its way to E-flat, which we approach through the dominant once the Bs flatten up. That gentle rap of Bs (half note, quarter, quarter) also supplies a sort of “straight” version of the opening tune, a kinked arrangement of dotted quarter note, eighth, eighth, dotted quarter (ex. 1). Since it constitutes a genuine leitmotif (conceptual and adaptive in a way that distinguishes it from a simple plug), we could call it the *fatum adversum* theme. It recurs in the betrothal scene, where it accompanies Christie’s despair at losing Jessie to Donald, and again at the end of Hela’s self-explaining aria (the kind of piece that Sullivan would parody so deliciously, as a Methodist “testimony,” in *Ruddigore*’s “I once was a very abandoned person”). Here Hela describes his fall from grace, or, rendered in Thack-

Example 1. “*Fatum adversum*” motif (first version).

crayese, his conversion from a “flowret to a fiend” (104)—an odd reversal of the way Ovidian metamorphosis ordinarily works!

In a smoothed-out version (ex. 2), the *fatum adversum* motif also figures in the development of the overture, where it caps the G-major reprise of the bridal song (about which more shortly) and also intrudes into the initial fairy chorus, where, as on the first page, it floats over a diminished-seventh tremolo—a sinister little cloud that hovers over the idyll from time to time, alerting us to the danger implicit in Donald’s love for Aeolia. It is altogether more arresting in its initial version, however, where it represents a kind of contained malevolence, the flicker and fork of the eighth notes enclosed by a smooth rhythmic chiasmus, recalling *Measure for Measure*’s “O, ’tis the cunning livery of hell / The damnedst body to invest and cover / In precise guards!” (3.I.94–96). This dangerous-sounding motif now slides, still on a cushion of tremolo strings, into Jessie’s wedding march, here barely recognizable in a fat, languid paraphrase. Even so, Temperley ought not to have included it among the “themes used to

Example 2. “*Fatum adversum*” motif (second version).

evoke the supernatural,” for it represents the exigencies of the flesh.⁵ Its sluggishness at this point of the opera is partly a function of Victorian taste — the bloated, indolent ballad melodies from Bishop’s “Home, sweet home” (*Clari*) to Wallace’s “Scenes that are brightest” (*Maritana*) to Balfe’s “I dreamt I dwelt” (*The Bohemian Girl*) that contemporary taste finds hard to stomach — but it also represents a *coup de théâtre*. After all, the wedding march is viewed here *sub specie sylphidis*, turned from something brisk and mortal to something indolent and otherworldly (as Victorian piety conceived its “other world,” through the Protestant chorale).

The overture, having started with the contrariness of fate, moves to a concrete instance of that contrariety, the subversion of Donald’s marriage plans by his yearning for the Other. Key relations play a crucial role in this regard. At several points in the opera, not least the opening chorus of sylphs, E-flat establishes itself as the sphere of sylphdom, and it is fitting that the marriage motif (for the march also signifies Christie’s anguish about Jessie during the contract scene) should have been transposed from its native G into the key of the flattened submediant. Romantic opera had already gone some way toward reading the tonic/flattened submediant relationship as that subsisting between reality and the supernatural Other. Think, for example, of how the statue supervenes on *Zampa*’s roistering D-major brindisi with B-flat interjections and how, in Kuhlau’s *Lulu*, another brindisi, this time in G (“Kloden maate”), likewise converts to E-flat when it is taken up by the sorcerer Dillfeng. And a mere seven years after *The Mountain Sylph*, Adolphe Adam would embed in the G major of his prelude to *Giselle* a lyrical E-flat episode (nonrecurring, but idiomatically related to the Wili music of act 2) that hints at the supernatural shape of things to come. This was confirmed in the 1870s, when an unknown composer (probably Ludwig Minkus) inserted into *Giselle*’s “supernatural” act an E-flat waltz version of the first act’s G-major betrothal music. No surprise, therefore, that Jessie’s E-flat epithalamion should close with a triad constructed on the mediant, and that Barnett should then have collapsed its B-flat back to B-natural (shades of the false start) to make a G-major chord, the dominant of C.

And in C we fleetingly stay for the first subject, ushered in by an extremely long chromatic scale, prosaic on paper, but mesmeric in performance. (One recalls how Tchaikovsky admired Wagner’s nerve at doing so much with so little at the start of *Das Rheingold*.) The length of this scale is as much a function of its stutter as its range (two eighth notes to each half tone), and it has the effect, *avant la lettre*, of an aircraft revving its propellers before takeoff. The idea of ascent is important, for we have left the quotidian world of life with Jessie for life with Aeolia. Barnett was nothing if not logical in his structural organization of the score, and he went on to use an identical scale (in reverse) to represent the nether-dwelling Salamanders (ex. 3). At first, the sylph melody (ex. 4) is nothing more than a cadential doodle, a plagal alternation of I and IV 6/4, but it soon peels away, in an increased harmonic rhythm and through chromatic sequences, to another cadential flutter in B, then G minor, then F minor. Clearly

Example 3. "Salamander" scale.



Barnett has conceived Aeolia, as Mendelssohn conceived his fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in terms of dragonflies or moths. Nothing suggests the act of hovering more effectively than that high tremolo pedal and the stasis of a repeated cadence, which, even while it marks time, suggests the little adjustments that a hovering creature must make to maintain stability.

This theme, while programmatic, is not motival, for it never recurs in the opera proper—a practice common in medley overtures, many of which introduce at least some material with no explicit connection to the drama's economy. There is no operatic provenance for the spirited D-major polka in the *Zampa* overture, for example, even though almost all its other material is recycled. However, Barnett is quick to conjoin his fluttering theme with a curious

Example 4. "Sylph" motif.

Allegretto Scherzando

little march episode that does indeed originate in a later fairy scene, anticipating the regimented note values, and, with those, the miniaturized militarism of *Iolanthe*'s "dainty little fairies" and of the "Dancers who the nimblest be" in Sullivan's *Masque at Kenilworth* before that. So far as I am able to tell, this musical tradition originates with Mendelssohn, for at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we have a reprise of the hovering theme with its stuttered pedal points, and over that, a syllabified marchlike melody to carry the words "Through the house give glimmering light." Barnett achieves precisely this effect of resoluteness superimposed on something delicate when he countervails the indecisive, fluttering theme with a dainty quickstep, complete with that intermitted pedal point from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Later on in the century the charm of the miniature marches in Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* (and the First Suite) would also be predicated on this disarming and scaling down of destructive impulses, but its aesthetic of transposition goes back further still—in the visual arts at least as far as Botticelli's *Mars and Venus*, in which little satyrs play with the war god's helmet and lance. Another interesting feature of Barnett's fairy march is the compound grace notes that on the one hand go back to the Janissary idiom of Mozart's "Turkish Rondo" and to the skirls of Highland music, and, on the other, draw more immediate inspiration from Meyerbeer's habit of blocking out his melodic members with puncta of one description or another.

Some Weberian scales serve to bridge the world of Aeolia with that of her antitype, Hela, who now enters the thematic design with his motif of *Schadenfreude* (ex. 5), which, in the opera itself, accompanies the words "Lightnings flash and thunders roar / Hela tastes of peace no more" (105–6). Barnett has forged a cunning connection between sylph and wizard, since both themes are expanded plagal cadences with IV in its tonic-tethered third inversion, and both are announced in C major. But whereas Aeolia's cadential motif gave way to a flitting chromatic passage to the next hovering zone, Hela's is followed by a sequence of lightning bolts in the trajectory of a diminished seventh, the moral bad weather of a vengeful soul. And indeed it is worth pausing to consider the operatic context of the motif for a moment, if only because it represents the tiny mustard seed from which that great tree of faithlessness, Iago's "Credo," might be said to have sprung. It is not unusual for villainous characters to disclose their villainy. Comic opera has its *agelastikos* bent on thwarting the drive toward marriage and procreation, and one could adduce countless instances of this convention, whether it be Bartolo's "La vendetta" in *Le nozze di Figaro* or Don Basilio's "La calunnia" in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. In both these examples, however, the display of evil is localized and ad hoc, an observation that applies just as much to the savoring of the *moment* in Pizarro's "Ha! welch' ein Augenblick" in *Fidelio*.

What differentiates Hela's aria is its centering not on a single anticomic stratagem, but rather, like the "Credo" in *Otello*, on the etiology of evil. For it would seem that, in Thackeray's vision, Hela is a Lucifer manqué—once "with heart

Example 5. Hela's "Schadenfreude" motif.



as mild as infant child / And features too as fair" (103)—who, through an unspecified misfortune in love, was converted to a fiend. In that, I would venture to suggest, lies the reason for the similar I–IV morphology of the two motifs, and also for their difference—Aeolia's a flighty alternation of chords, Hela's an angry rapping motif—the "clausula" beloved of Donizetti and Bellini for moments of crisis and decision. It is also interesting to remark that he begins in E-flat, the key of enchantment, to suggest the otherness of his innocent, unfiendish past, and converts to C to declare his present evil, an inversion of the tonic/flattened submediant relationship pointed to above, though restructured here in terms of the flattened mediant, still within the constellation of thirds. Other points worth remarking are the way the Scottish snap is used to ginger up the pedestrian Alberti bass in the reflective section ("In days gone by"—103), one of the many occasions where folkloric inflections energize Barnett's otherwise tired ballad idiom, and the way the aria obviously draws on the cavatina/cabaletta formula of Italian opera (meditation, agitated transition, angry resolution), while also containing curious prefigurations of "It is enough" from Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. The momentum of gathering fury is represented in both cases by secondary dominants across a tonic/relative minor landscape, and its bursting forth by variants of the Donizetti "crisis" clausula.

Resuming and completing the survey of the overture's thematic outline, one notes that the Hela motif generates a good deal of Sturm und Drang, effected through the standard Romantic vehicles of syncopation and diminution (but telling, even so), before leading to a G-major eye of the storm. This is the bridal march, still enlarged with grublike whole notes and half notes but now in its correctly "mortal" key of G, though an augmentation in the bass begins to pull it out of shape, and it is soon subverted by an E-flat version of the "smoothed" *fatum adversum* motif (which occurs in the sylph chorus). This reminds us that Jessie's happiness is threatened not so much by Hela as by Aeolia. Hela's lightning recurs in due course, and in due course too, a still fat wedding march that intrudes on C in the key of the flattened submediant, before sequencing up, with crude tremolo gear changes, through A and B-flat to reach a particularly inspired moment of the opera, the witches' dance. Since these are the henchpersons of Hela's plan to thwart Donald, and help fashion the magic scarf, the

idea that the wedding march should draw level (through that sequencing) to the instrument of death is a particularly striking *coup de théâtre*. In addition, the dance itself is thoroughly delightful, recalling the cadential shape of the other motifs, except that this comprises a stamping, inside-out *perfect* cadence in the bass, over which Barnett superimposes a parody of the gavottelike, dotted fairy music. There follows a recapitulation of the first theme, complete with chromatic flight path, but this veers off course at the point the Hela motif should appear; in its stead Barnett gives us the finale of the fortune-telling scene, thus expounding the immediate motivation for Hela's hatred of Donald (over and above his *Menschenhass*), namely, his expulsion from the homestead. A pretty B-flat postlude, in which chords in the second and third inversion fold over each other, leads à la *Don Giovanni* to a whimper instead of a terminal bang, and the dominant cues in a segue to an E-flat fairy chorus.

The chorus in question is a mosaic of melodic fragments, and there can be no doubting that Barnett had gone to school on the innovative melodic structure in *Robert le diable*. As Temperley points out, he “abandoned most traditional forms: there are few strophic songs or rondos, nor binary or sonata form arias; he created forms according to the demands of the various scenes.”⁶ That principle of adaptability *de facto* issued in a mosaic idiom, the formal variousness we tend to associate more readily with Meyerbeer, though Meyerbeer himself simply consolidated a change that had long been coming. If we look, for example, at the *recitativo accompagnato* of Baroque opera, we often find little illustrative fragments slipped into the spaces of the declamation. A classic example would be Juno's recitative in Handel's *Semele*—“Awake, Saturnia, from thy lethargy”—with its representations of ascent (sequent inversions of the G-major triad), of falling (first reluctant and stiff-limbed with resistant dotting, then fluent, then finally an irresistible thirty-second-note tumble), and finally a commanding, heraldic motif (in the regally removed key of E-flat after F-sharp) to represent her entitlement to “th'imperial sceptre.”

There is very little difference between this—beyond a marginally more developed melodic impetus—and such arioso-like solos as that at the end of Rossini's *La Cenerentola*. In the Rossini we find, *incorporated into the texture of the song itself*, vestigial *accompagnato* elements—the orchestra's lightning runs against a rap of subdominant chords for “baleno”—that punctuate and emblemize the melodic line, just as in Baroque recitative. We even encounter programmatic signifiers at the level of harmony, for the standard cadence of that same subdominant “lightning” into dominant and then into tonic enacts the stabilizing closure of “cangio.”⁷

With all this in the air in the 1830s, and with Wagner's eventual dismemberment of traditional melody only decades away, one should not be surprised to find Meyerbeer developing a new tessellation in his first original opera—*Robert le diable* (he had, after all, served a long enough apprenticeship at the feet of Rossini). If we analyze Alice's aria along these lines, we find that it comprises a chirpy march, monitory gestures, a tonic-tethered bass figure with jerky upper

parts (recalling those études crafted by Bertini et al. for the perfection of “octaves with firm accompanying chords”), and a brooding postlude in which a chromatic melody circulates over cadences miniaturized into appoggiature.

The same principle of diversification can be seen in much of *The Mountain Sylph*. Dispensing with the ballad tradition so closely woven into English opera from the time of Dibdin onward, Barnett offers us a state-of-the-art collection of shreds and patches, and nowhere more tellingly than in the opening chorus, to which I must now return. In a nice emblemization of Aeolia’s name, he starts with a note-by-note imbrication of the E-flat triad, not unlike a famous moment in Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D minor, but more obviously concerned to represent the sympathetic harmonics of an Aeolian lyre. The next idea is totally unrelated — a gavottelike dotted motif that seems to represent a nineteenth-century idea of feminine archness. Remembering the whole-chord pedal points in John Field’s B-flat Nocturne, Barnett adapts them into cadential figures, squaring off the phrases into Meyerbeerian blocks, a strategy that recalls the marching figure in the overture. He also drew on *Oberon*’s fairy chorus, for it, too, alternates languor with animated, squared off interjections, and so indeed do the first bars of Weber’s overture.

But in addition to these marked continental influences, *Sylph* taps into another tradition, one that gives shape and bounce to its idiom and quite often saves it from the marshy lyric idiom that, to my mind at least, disfigures other English operas of the period. One such example is the bridal march, which in the opera proper reveals a perky, snappy outline very different from its sluggish “ectoplasmic” version in the overture. It is more than likely that Barnett derived its vivacity from the Scottish folksong “The Birks of Aberfeldy.” Some of the grotesque music (the witches’ dance, for example) owes a great deal to the Scottish dotting so typical of strathspeys (“Captain Pringle of Yair,” say), and to the compound *acciaccature* we find in such reels as “The Honourable Miss Charteris” or “Miss Maule of Panmure.” To claim, therefore, as Temperley does, that *Sylph*’s “music was a good deal less ‘English’ than most of Bishop’s”⁸ to some extent holds true (however typical its lapses into the lyric torpor of the Victorian stage), but the statement needs to be countered by the realization that it was also a good deal more Scottish, and indeed more purposefully Scottish than Dent’s dismissive assessment would lead us to believe: “an imitation of Weber, more often of the mellifluous Marschner, with a little Scotch thrown in.”⁹ It is this infusion of native rhythms into the “mortal” music of the opera that makes *Sylph* so distinctive an *opéra féerique*. If one compares it, with such *style galant* offerings as, say, Grétry’s *Zémire et Azor*, one finds, in the latter, no musical differentiation of the quotidian and fantastic worlds, but rather a thin, mellifluous continuity between Sander’s home and Azor’s palace. Neither here, nor even in an *echt*-Romantic *opéra féerique* like Kuhlau’s *Lulu*, are the musical spaces so clearly delimited and opposed in social terms, though obviously Kuhlau gives us oppositions between the hymnic and grotesque that ultimately go back to *Die Zauberflöte*.

Romantic opera had to some extent followed the example of Cervantes by juxtaposing basic appetite (Sancho Panza) with idealism (Don Quixote), and had engendered such standard polar contrasts as that between Tamino and Papageno, Floreski and Varbel in Cherubini's *Lodoïska*, Rocco and Leonore in *Fidelio*, and Scherasmin and Huon in *Oberon*. It took Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture to construct an analogous but different paradigm that sets ethereality against fleshliness (the lovers' theme) on the one hand and bestiality (Bottom's motif) on the other, a paradigm that would subsequently inform the entire structure of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. *The Mountain Sylph* is full of Caledonian touches, not least the "Scottish snap" that ends the exposition of the *fatum adversum* motif at the beginning of the overture and the virile, curtailed note values of Donald's answer ("Too fatal beauty"—ex. 6) to the Sylph's more regulated phrases in "Farewell forever" (72). They create a fresh, Highland idiom that breaks into the languid deportment of Aeolia's tune, flaccid in a typically Victorian way. (We also find this droopiness in many lyric melodies by Sir Arthur Sullivan, always less invigorating than the spirited tarantellas and hornpipes that flank them.) Before we leave that duet, we can remark how skillfully Barnett sets up a harmonic contrast between human and fairy worlds. E-flat has been demarcated as a fairy sphere in the first pages of the overture, when Jessie's epithalamion (G in the opera proper) is brought into its harmonic orbit. The duet between Donald and Aeolia likewise begins in E-flat, modulating in due course to A-flat. Then, by constructing a minor triad on the dominant of A-flat (E-flat minor) in its second inversion, Barnett rewrites the root and the third as D-sharp and G-sharp respectively, and then raises the fifth a half tone to make a B-major triad. The words that accompany this clever transition are no less apposite, for Aeolia here swears that she will persuade Donald to abandon Jessie by assuming the latter's form. That such transformations were feasible in terms of nineteenth-century stagecraft is attested by Bournonville's ballet *Napoli*, in which Teresina converts from nixie to human by a change of dress effected through a trap door. We can be reasonably certain, therefore, that Aeolia was wearing a tartan plaid beneath a tarlatan overskirt at this point and that the one was swiftly removed to reveal the other.

When it comes to the Sturm und Drang invocation that follows on the heels of Hela's confessional aria, Temperley is right on target: "Inevitably Weber was his chief inspiration: the fairy choruses recall *Oberon* as much as the invocation scene suggests *Der Freischütz*."¹⁰ But an even closer dramatic analogue to the invocation scene is to be found not in *Der Freischütz* but in *Oberon* once again. Puck's summoning of the Spirits has the same sense of cosmic assembly, however light and benign its underlying motive. Musically, on the other hand, it differs from Weber's energetic, cumulative allegros and seems to look back to the more immediate model of *Robert le diable*'s spectral nuns, who make their entrée to a tentative, halting march. This sense of doleful uncertainty registers in the way the triplets protract the progress of the melody and in the way chorales are insinuated between their indolent coilings (ex. 7), the combined

Example 6. Donald's contribution to the love duet.

Donald.

Too fa - tal beau - ty What faith or du - ty Can e'er op - [pose]

effect of which recalls Pope's "wounded Snake" that "drags its slow length along."¹¹ It is possible that Barnett based this scene, so distinctive and yet un-Romantic in its musical language, on Francesco Durante's *cantio sacra* "Vergin, tutto amor," also in a minor key, also trudgingly tripleted in 12/8, and also resolving, for variety's sake, into the *alla zoppa* pattern of quarter note, half, quarter,

Example 7. Invocation scene.

Hela speaks from the cavern

Haste spirits hither throng Trooping to our bra - zen gong.

sound gong

1st and 2nd Witch

Haste spir - its hi - ther throng, Troop - ing to our bra - zen gong.

3rd Witch

Haste spir - its hi - ther throng, Troop - ing to our bra - zen gong.

half. This *Modeltechnik* of waggishly applying a “holy” song to an unholy purpose would accord with the older, freethinking Barnett, who embraced the cause of evolution. But even if his religious thinking was less advanced in 1834 — he had published an oratorio entitled *The Omnipresence of the Deity* four years before — it is still possible that he anticipated Meyerbeer in making covert anti-Christian statements by appropriating Christian music (whether the chorale of *Les Huguenots* or the pastiche plainsong in *Le prophète*) to the unholy purposes that Christians have so often pursued. Invoking witches to *preghiera*-like music associated with the BVM must surely have had a Faustian significance for the composer.

These, then, are some of the pleasures offered by a minor score, and, as so often, that minority is bound up with their frail charm, like pressed Victorian nose-gays. The smallness of the context and the restraint of the writing was far removed from contemporary grand opera — but no harm in that. After all, in *The Farewell Symphony*, Edmund White writes that he “didn’t want to be very famous or even famous; I just wanted to be published. In fact no accolade seemed higher to me than that of ‘a minor writer,’ because it exempted its bearer from the obligation to treat the great themes (birth, marriage, adultery, divorce), which in any event were closed to me as a homosexual. I liked reading minor writers more than major ones — Henry Green more than George Eliot, Ronald Firbank more than Hemingway, Ivy Compton-Burnett more than Tolstoy.”¹²

But, much as the apologist and advocate in me would like to take leave of Barnett in such august “minor” company as Firbank and Compton-Burnett, conscience requires me to demote him to the lower middle minor class! For where he lets us down, and lets us down consistently, is in the comparative flatness and sameness of his solo arias and in his frequent failure to inflect them with any kind of dramatic urgency. The source of this shortcoming is not hard sought. Even though much was made of *The Mountain Sylph*’s being the first *durchkomponiert* English opera since Thomas Arne’s 1762 *Artaxerxes*, one repeatedly senses the heritage of the ballad tradition, a tradition exemplified by *The Beggar’s Opera*, and the inert intercalation of airs into the drama. But when he is able to get his teeth into the few big ensembles and scenas that Thackeray gave him, Barnett *does* evolve dynamic musical textures that glow, even if their fire is very pale.

NOTES

1. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. “Barnett, John.”

2. Parenthetical page numbers refer to the score of John Barnett, *The Mountain Sylph: A Grand Opera in Two Acts as Performed at the New Theatre Royal English Opera House, Written by T. J. Thackeray Esqre, Composed by John Barnett* (London: Joseph Williams, n.d.), p. 66.

3. By way of anecdotal aside, one can note that when Filippo Taglioni’s *Sylphide* was rechoreographed by the Danish choreographer Bournonville in 1836 — two years after the premiere of Barnett’s opera — the witch’s role, which had been assigned to a woman in the 1832 version, was danced by a man, Carl Fredstrup. This just might owe something to Barnett’s opera.

4. Edward J. Dent, *Opera* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940), p. 170. Dent proved rather harsh on *The Mountain Sylph*, deservedly so with regard to its versification, which *is* indeed “ludicrously awkward,” but he was insufficiently ready to acknowledge the trim, polar contrast of mortal and fairy worlds that Thackeray took over from Nourrit before ruining it with his clumsy quest-finale.

5. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. “Barnett, John.”

6. *Ibid.*

7. It is also worth remembering that, at the same time as operatic arias were beginning to shift from integral, homophonic arcs to spliced-up medleys, similar changes were also under way in some instrumental music, not least the catenas of short elements that often

did service as sonata subjects. Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in E, op. 14, no. 1 comes to mind, for Donald Tovey has remarked on the “apparent inconsequence of the first paragraph with its four disconnected but self-repeating ideas” in Ludwig Beethoven, *Sonatas for Pianoforte*, ed. Harold Craxton, commentaries and notes by Donald Tovey, 3 vols. (London: Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 1931), vol. 1, p. 192.

8. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. “Barnett, John.”

9. Dent, *Opera*, p. 170.

10. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. “Barnett, John.”

11. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, part 2, line 357.

12. Edmund White, *The Farewell Symphony* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 31.