

## PRE-PERFORMANCE LECTURE

by *Blodwen* editor and publisher Dulais Rhys (duration: c1 hour)

### ***Blodwen: the first Welsh opera and its composer Joseph Parry (1841-1903)***

*An illustrated presentation on the history and role of the opera and its Welsh-American composer.*

#### **The opera**

Dr. Joseph Parry was appointed Professor [Chair] of Music at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth (a town on the country's west coast), in 1874, shortly after the institution opened its doors for the first time. He had seen many operas, both in America and in London, starting with Beethoven's *Fidelio* in Philadelphia in 1863, and had resolved to write an opera for Welsh people, in the Welsh language, based on historical events. He enlisted his friend Richard Davies, a poet whose bardic name was *Mynyddog*, as librettist and the result of their collaboration was the first Welsh opera, *Blodwen*, completed in February, 1877.

The first public performance took place fifteen months later on May 21, 1878 - Parry's 37th birthday - in Aberystwyth's Temperance Hall, the venue of many concerts in the 1870s but long since demolished.

The cast mostly consisted of Parry's students; the accompaniment was a piano and a harmonium, played by the composer's sons, 13 year old, Joseph Haydn Parry, and David Mendelssohn Parry, who was 12.

Few people in Aberystwyth - or even in Wales - had seen an operatic performance or known what to expect. Parry therefore felt it necessary to address the audience, prior to the start of the performance, explaining what an opera was and emphasizing that the singers, though in costume, would not be 'acting'. Welsh churches strongly disapproved of stage performances and regarded theaters as morally equivalent to alehouses and brothels. Nevertheless, the hall was packed and the audience enthusiastic. Despite an improbable and historically inaccurate plot, stylistically eclectic music, amateur performers and static staging, the performance was a resounding success. *Blodwen* spread like wildfire and, by the end of the 19th century, there had been over 500 performances in Wales.

Although its popularity declined during the 20th century, parts of *Blodwen* continued to be performed in concerts in Wales as well as in those parts of the United States where there had been significant Welsh immigration.

#### **The composer**

Joseph Parry was born in the south Wales industrial town of Merthyr Tudful in 1841 into a Welsh-speaking, musical and devout Christian family. His father worked in the local iron works and, in 1853, emigrated to Danville, Pennsylvania where there was a flourishing expatriate Welsh community.

A year later, his family joined him and Joseph went to work in the same rolling mill as his father. As his interest in music grew, Joseph took lessons from local Welsh émigrés, developed a fine baritone voice and became a competent organist. He began to compose, and in 1860, submitted composition entries to a local *eisteddfod* [a cultural festival of competitions in the arts] and won prizes.

As Parry matured as a composer, in 1863 and 1864, he submitted compositions to Wales's National Eisteddfod, winning numerous prizes. In 1865, he traveled to Aberystwyth to attend

the National Eisteddfod, where he was given the appropriate bardic name, *Pencerdd America* – the country's 'principal musician'.

After returning to Danville, funds were raised by the Welsh-American community which enabled Parry to spend 1868-71 at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where he studied singing, organ and composition – for which he won many prizes.

Following his return to America, he opened 'Danville Musical Institute' – his own music college, which became a successful educational establishment.

Parry was then persuaded to return to Wales to take up the position of Professor of Music at the newly formed University College of Wales in Aberystwyth and it was during his years there that his best known music was written: the hymn-tune *Aberystwyth* (included in many hymnals worldwide), the part-song *Myfanwy* (as sung by the parading coal miners in the 1941 movie *How Green Was My Valley*) as well as the first Welsh opera, *Blodwen*.

Following increasing disagreement with the University College authorities, in 1881, Parry left Aberystwyth for Swansea to take up the post of church organist and to establish his own music college. In 1888, he moved to Cardiff to lecture in music at the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, where he remained until his death in 1903.

Though much of his best music was written in his later years, Parry is mostly remembered for his Aberystwyth period compositions and as the most famous and proud Welsh-American of the nineteenth century.

#### **Websites**

The life and music of Joseph Parry in general: [josephparry.org](http://josephparry.org)

Information on the background and chamber version of music of *Blodwen*:  
<http://dulaisrhysmusic.com/blodwen.htm>