

## BACKGROUND TO THIS CHAMBER VERSION

It gives me the greatest pleasure to dedicate this new chamber version of the first Welsh opera, *Blodwen*, to Mr. John Hywel, in memory of its composer, Joseph Parry.

My connection with *Blodwen* goes back to the 1970s. I was a research student at University College of North Wales (as it was known then), Bangor, into the life and music of Joseph Parry. My academic supervisor was John Hywel, who, at that time, was a lecturer in the University's Music Department. John was also Director of Gŵyl Gerdd Menai – a music festival that had decided to celebrate the centenary of the first performance of *Blodwen* with a concert version during the 1978 event.

Early in 1977, John asked me to research the usefulness and practicality of the original orchestral score of *Blodwen*. All of Joseph Parry's music manuscripts are stored at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth and as I examined the *Blodwen* manuscript, I came to the conclusion that the score, as it was, was not appropriate for public performance. Simply: Parry was a better composer than orchestrator. His choice of instruments for the score was unusual e.g. top-heavy with brass (possibly these were the only instruments available to him at the time), only a few of the orchestral parts have survived, the copyist's handwriting (not Parry) is difficult to read and most importantly, the score is full of mistakes, gaps and inappropriate textures – sometimes too 'thin' (not enough instruments) and other times too 'thick' (too many instruments). It seems as though Parry – as with most aspects of his creative life – worked at haste. A public performance of this score would show his weaknesses as an orchestrator.

In view of this disappointment, I proposed another option to John Hywel: I would create a new orchestral score based on Joseph Parry's orchestration, estimating that the work would take up to a year to complete. Unlike the original score, my choice of instruments was conventional: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, percussion and strings. I wanted to ensure that unusual orchestration such as Parry's would not be an obstacle to any future performance.

But everything changed during the summer of 1977: I had won a scholarship to study composition at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, U.S.A. I could not break my promise to John, so carrying an enormous photocopy of the score of *Blodwen*, I left Wales for a year of study abroad.

In Baltimore, I soon came to realize the mountain of work that was ahead of me and how much time it would take to complete. My arrangement with John was to mail the new score to him one act at a time and he would arrange for a professional copyist to prepare the orchestral parts. (Nowadays, all this can be done digitally over the internet)

But soon my work on the new *Blodwen* score began to 'run late'. Act 1 was not completed until Christmas 1977 and I would have to work faster and more intensely if I was to complete

the score in time. To be fair to John, in spite of the great distance between us, he waited patiently for my work to arrive. I received a few phone calls from him – a technological achievement in those days - but never a complaint for ‘being late’. Act 2 was finished in February 1978 – the year of the planned performance – and the final note completed on March 9<sup>th</sup>.

Since John was anxious to receive the third act, the quickest way to get it to him was by air. Almost before the ink was dry on my manuscript, I was driving with the score to Dulles International Airport near Washington D.C. and almost literally threw the package onto a plane to cross the Atlantic to Wales.

The rehearsals and preparations for the performance of *Blodwen* had been taking place for months and since I wanted to hear the fruits of my labor, I had decided that I was going to be present at the historic event on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1978.

I arrived in Bangor a few days before the performance in order to attend the rehearsals and, in particular, to sort out any musical problems arising from the new score – very few, thankfully. John, the soloists, choir and orchestra had been rehearsing diligently and the resulting musical standard was high.

As well as the historic status of the performance, came the exciting news that the BBC would be broadcasting the event live on Radio Cymru – a great compliment to the persuasive efforts of Menai Music Festival officials. But there was a caveat: at 10pm sharp, the broadcast would cut to the BBC news on the hour, even if the performance was still in progress. So during the performance, I – like everyone else who was aware of this broadcasting guillotine – kept an eagle eye on the clock. To everyone’s relief, the final note of *Blodwen* was sung at around 9:55pm and, after some minutes of applause, the broadcast faded effortlessly to the news.

I returned to the USA on a cloud to complete my year of study and though I have experienced many musical highlights there and elsewhere during my career as a musician, that historic performance of *Blodwen* remains one of the musical projects of which I am most proud.

After returning to Wales, I contacted Welsh National Opera in an attempt to persuade the company to perform this new version of *Blodwen* ... but with no luck. To be fair to the company, the principal reason for rejecting my proposal was financial – it is a fact that producing professional opera is extremely expensive and filling large theaters with substantial audiences is essential for financial success.

So I realized that the solution was to create yet another version of *Blodwen* – a chamber score of the opera, for a small orchestra (minimum 13 players) which meant it could be performed in smaller theaters. This was also an opportunity to replace Professor David Rowlands’s old-fashioned English ‘translation’ of the Welsh words with a phonetic version of the original libretto on the score. I have always believed that *Blodwen* should only be sung in Welsh - now there was no reason why non-Welsh speakers could not sing Wales’s first opera in its original

language. Finally, during the 1978 performance of my full score, I had heard some aspects of my orchestration that needed revision - this new chamber version eliminates those deficiencies.

On editing the new score: since Parry's original score is uneven and inconsistent in musical detail; for example, few or absent dynamics, I have not shown the vast majority of my editing. Noting every change/adaptation/addition/correction etc. would have resulted in an excessive amount of editorial detail. Instead, editorial brackets 「」 are included in obvious or important places only.

I have also edited and published a Vocal Score, creating a version which is more faithful to Parry's original intentions. This piano copy – like the new Full Score – includes the phonetic equivalent of the Welsh lyrics.

This new Vocal Score can be compared to a copy of the Snell 1917 edition of the Vocal Score: [imslp.org/wiki/Blodwen, Op.31 \(Parry, Joseph\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Blodwen,_Op.31_(Parry,_Joseph)) This website [imslp.org](https://imslp.org) also contains other examples of Joseph Parry's music.

My hope – and dream – in completing this new chamber version of *Blodwen* is that any opera company can now perform the first Welsh opera. The whole world deserves to hear Joseph Parry's masterpiece.

D.R.

San Francisco

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P.S. for more information on the life and music of Joseph Parry in general, visit [josephparry.org](https://josephparry.org)