
Downloaded from: http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/3288/

Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria’s institutional repository ‘Insight’ must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria’s institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/3288/)) for educational and not-for-profit activities provided that

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
- a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

You may not

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator’s reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/3288/).
Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing [insight@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:insight@cumbria.ac.uk).
AN INTERPLAY OF PASSION AND SPIRIT
The Nightingale’s to Blame
Richard E. McGregor

Simon Holt’s one-act opera *The Nightingale’s to Blame* was written between 1996 and 1998 and given its first performance at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival the same year. For this first excursion into the realm of theatre Holt returned to the work of Federico García Lorca. He used David Johnston’s translation of the source play, preserving its basic structure: a Prologue and three scenes.

Holt’s attraction to the dark, sensuous imagery of Lorca’s poetry had resulted, over the previous fourteen years, in four works using words or images from the poems. The opera’s title makes direct reference to the bird which the poet used as a symbol for illusion. Lorca’s original title for the play was (in translation) *The Love of Don Perlimplín for Belisa in the Garden*. As a musician himself, he built numerous musical allusions into the play, which has proved attractive to various composers as an opera subject, perhaps most notably Bruno Maderna, whose radiophonic work dates from 1962. Assassinated in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War, Lorca did not live to see any of the operatic adaptions of his text. The work occupied him between 1926 and 1929, but fell foul of Spanish censors prior to its planned first performance in 1929, ostensibly because the theatre company had failed to observe mourning for...
the recently deceased Queen Mother, [but] in all likelihood it was because the role of a cuckold was to be acted by a retired army officer, which could have damaged the dignity of the military.¹

It was finally given in 1933 during the period of the Second Republic.

**Background to the opera**

The play’s main character is Don Perlimplín, an ‘aging bachelor’. In the Prologue, his maid Marcolfa, no younger than he, berates him for having passed his fiftieth year and being still unmarried. She draws his attention to the beautiful Belisa, a sensuous woman easily half his age, highly eligible, who lives next door: we hear her singing. Under Marcolfa’s prompting Perlimplín calls out loudly; Belisa appears on her balcony, almost unclothed (b. 355). Perlimplín next pays court to Belisa’s mother, who agrees to the match: he is wealthy, after all. As Belisa ‘throws open the shutters on her balcony’ (b. 499), the scene changes.

Scene One takes place on the wedding night; it is apparent that Perlimplín has no knowledge of women and is incapable of consummation.² Two *Duendes* appear (b. 747) and determine to play a trick on the bridegroom while he is asleep. Belisa cuckolds him by having five lovers in her bedroom during the night, who, as Marcolfa will inform the Don, represent five different nationalities of the earth. As dawn breaks (b. 932), Perlimplín appears with golden pair of stag’s antlers on his head – representing his status as cuckold. However, he tells Belisa that he is now in love with her, having spied on her through the keyhole as she dressed, earlier the previous day. Belisa dodges his questions about the meaning of the hats and ladders which have been let by the balconies and, as the nightingale sings, he realises that she has no soul; there is only one way open to him, as he believes, to give her one.³

Scene Two finds Perlimplín discovering from a distressed Marcolfa what has happened during the night. As Belisa comes in, Perlimplín hides momentarily, listening as Belisa talks about a lover. She and Perlimplín come face to face: then a stone with a message wrapped round it is thrown through the window. Perlimplín makes Belisa read it to him, and it appears that it comes from a mysterious stranger in a red cloak with whom, although she has never seen his face, she has become obsessed. Rather than assuming the role of jealous lover Perlimplín seems to change and, almost like a father figure, declares that he will help her to meet the stranger. He tells her to be in the garden later and the stranger will come to her.

² See bb. 713–16, later in Scene 1.
³ The further significance of the nightingale in the opera will be explored in relation to Ex. 2.1.

---

*An Interplay of Passion and Spirit*
Scene Three takes place in the garden. Marcolfa finds Perlimplín there, reminiscing; they discuss Belisa’s infatuation. Perlimplín hides behind the rose bushes to watch; offstage, the Duendes and Belisa’s mother comment on the action. Belisa sings alone in the moonlight; the red-cloaked figure appears only briefly and is immediately followed by Don Perlimplín. Since Belisa loves the stranger, Perlimplín swears he will kill him so that the young man will love her ‘with the endless love of the dead’. Belisa hopes to intervene but the red-cloaked figure staggers in, face at first concealed. Perlimplín is dying of a stab wound to the heart which he has inflicted on himself, although Belisa does not understand this. Dying, he tells Belisa he has given her the soul she never had, while in complete bewilderment she keeps asking where the red-cloaked stranger is, not realising that the stranger and Don Perlimplín were one. She does not register Marcolfa’s line, ‘We’ll lay him out in his young man’s suit of clothes, so red and so fine, that he used to wear under your balcony.’

Table 2.1 Structure plan of The Nightingale’s to Blame (source: piano-vocal score).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene divisions</th>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Stage setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prologue Bb. 1–509</td>
<td>Don Perlimplín, Marcolfa, Belisa, Belisa’s mother</td>
<td>A room in Don Perlimplín’s house with an upright piano, centre stage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 1, p. 49 Bb. 510–1099</td>
<td>Don Perlimplín, Belisa, 2 Duendes</td>
<td>A room in the same house containing a splendid four-poster bed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 2, p. 103 Bb. 1100–1373</td>
<td>Don Perlimplín, Marcolfa, Belisa</td>
<td>Don Perlimplín’s dining room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 3, p. 131 Bb. 1374–1792</td>
<td>Don Perlimplín, Marcolfa, 2 Duendes and Belisa’s mother (voices offstage)</td>
<td>A garden of cypresses and orange-trees.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although this plot could be thought of as a version of the Beauty and the Beast tale, Lorca introduced Duendes into the narrative. In traditional Spanish folklore the Duendes are household spirits that can be gremlin-like and troubling, but, in the Spanish cultural context duende has become an expression for passion, spirit and inspiration, and therefore almost untranslatable as a conceptual idea in English. Thus duende becomes ‘dark sound’, the trouble in the voice that gives

2 Ibid., p. 171.