

# Bernard Stevens

*Opera* **THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN**

Della Jones

John Gibbs

Paul Hudson

Neil Mackie

Divertimenti Orchestra

Howard Williams, conductor

*Song cycle* **THE TRUE DARK**

Richard Jackson, baritone

Igor Kennaway, piano



## BERNARD STEVENS (1916-1983)

Although he was one of the most important British composers of the mid-20th Century, during his lifetime Bernard Stevens attracted rather less attention than some of his contemporaries. He was a fine pianist (in his teens he was given free lessons by the renowned pianist and Bach specialist Harold Samuel); however composition became his preoccupation after study in the 1930s with E. J. Dent at Cambridge University, followed by the renowned pedagogue R. O. Morris at the Royal College of Music in London. Here Stevens gained the highest awards, and later became a distinguished professor. During service in World War II he succeeded in completing two of his most important early works, a *Violin Concerto* for Max Rostal and his *First Symphony*. The latter work, entitled *Symphony of Liberation*, brought Stevens to national prominence when it won a competition sponsored by the Daily Express newspaper for a 'Victory Symphony' to celebrate the Allies' victory in the War. The symphony received a widely-publicized and prestigious first performance in the Royal Albert Hall, followed by others in main cities.

Although this early publicity was not sustained, Stevens was highly respected within the musical fraternity. He composed steadily, and his works were performed; but it was more or less inevitable that his professed left-wing sympathies and intellectual and moral integrity sometimes brought him into conflict with the attitudes of the British musical establishment. Moreover his music, which represented a dedicated yet highly individual championship of traditional musical forms and values, had no place among the stylistic fashions being promoted as

"New Music" in the 1960s and 70s. Nonetheless he was known and esteemed as a distinguished professor at the RCM and the University of London. He was a born educator who nourished the talents and artistic standards of many successful and devoted pupils. As an examiner he travelled widely, occasionally performing his own works; in the 1950s and 60s his connection with left-wing musical organizations made him more familiar with Eastern Europe than most of his peers. He was made a fellow of the RCM in 1966, awarded a Cambridge Doctorate in 1969 and Hon. RAM in 1977.

Though a meticulous, highly self-critical composer, Stevens's output came to comprise an impressive body of orchestral works including two symphonies and three concertos, as well as chamber, vocal and choral music, solo instrumental compositions and one late opera. In the years since his death in 1983, this body of music has started to come into its own in performances and recordings, as its deep musical qualities are recognized.

Despite his solid academic record, Stevens was anything but academic in style, personality and convictions, but he certainly believed that any inspiration must be expressed through the fullest possible technical command and musical craftsmanship, an attitude manifested above all in his complete mastery of counterpoint for expressive ends. His voice is distinctive, capable of trenchant concision of utterance, rhythmic dynamism and a warm, sustained lyricism that remain highly individual in their effect. He was concerned with constructive power, the purposeful, organic growth of musical ideas. His themes are fashioned for development, full of latent energy to be released as the music proceeds. This characteristic is especially evident in the two works on this

can be felt: also the rarity of its appearance.

Swingler clearly meant "the form of a Passacaglia" to be understood figuratively, not literally; and Stevens's song-cycle is not in musical passacaglia form — i.e. it is not a set of continuous variations on a basic theme that is continually present. It does, however, have a form of its own in terms of self-consistent musical architecture, rather than simply following the lead of the text. There are ten songs but only four breaks in the development of musical thought: Songs I-II, III-V, VI-VII and VIII-X are grouped into four "movements" corresponding, to some extent, to the four movements of a work in sonata style. Although each song is strongly characterized, and performs the function of contrast and mood-change with regard to its fellows, the feeling created is one of open-endedness, each song looking beyond itself to the next and taking a continuous process of development one stage further. The individual songs are not, then, self-sufficient, but take their place in a larger overall scheme.

In thematic terms this song-cycle is very tight-knit, voice and piano partaking equally in the imitations and inversions of a master polyphonist. Much of the work's content — even the shape of many of the figurations — can be traced back to the rising-scale figure in the piano's left hand at the very opening. The harmony is frequently austere, founded on bare fourths and fifths — intervals which reinforce the tonality without any sense of cliché, and which prove especially evocative of Swingler's image of the

thought. Mainly he sets Swingler's words in a larger, truly musical scheme, and gives them a depth and articulation they do not possess on the page. After Song VIII, "Love Knows" — the cycle's lyrical climax — has returned the tonality to the ambiguous key of B, neither major nor minor, in which the cycle opened. Song IX, "Envoi," is a varied recapitulation of Song I and appears to close the circle in the still ambiguous B. But by adding the tenth song, "In the last fallible projection," Stevens breaks the circle: returning to the material of "Love knows," he develops it into a passionate final apotheosis in the warmth of an at-last-unequivocal B major.

*The Shadow of the Glen* - opera in one act, op.50

After *The True Dark*, Stevens turned to the writing of *The Shadow of the Glen*, which he composed in 1978-79. As mentioned above this is his only opera, though around 1949-51 he had partly drafted, but eventually abandoned, a three-act opera entitled *Mimosa* to a libretto by Montague Slater. While *Mimosa* was intended as an entry to an opera competition mounted by the Arts Council of Great Britain, *The Shadow of the Glen* seems to have been written without commission or any concrete plan for a production: rather from a strong inner impulse. Stevens's free time was much taken up at this period by his teaching duties, and it was only an Arts Council bursary awarded in November 1978 that allowed him to devote his efforts to completing the opera. Although eminently stage-worthy — it would

Irish idioms in “local colour” by evoking Irish fiddling and folksong, but Stevens’s approach is more restrained and insightful. Recognizing that the “Irish music” is already present in the cadences and speech-rhythms of the text, he concentrates on getting that text over with absolute clarity, whether in dialogue, or more heightened soliloquy. Any hint of folk-music as such is incidental, but another element in the lives of its characters is vital — the chant of the Roman Catholic Church. As Chris de Souza, the opera’s first champion and producer, has pointed out in his perceptive chapter on *The Shadow of the Glen*:

The entire score is based on the Dies Irae plainsong: highly appropriate, as it is part of the Requiem Mass, and the opera’s action hinges on Dan Burke’s feigned death. From this limited but pregnant source-material Stevens creates, with infinite craft and affection a score full of incident, humour, satire and tenderness, wide in expressive range, wholly natural in its word-setting, in the counterpoint of voices and instruments and the flow of one scene into the next. The result is a celebration rather than condemnation of human foibles, played out against the ever-present background of a harsh, wild, but magically beautiful landscape.

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## **The True Dark, Op.49**

### **I Invocation: Comet Silence**

Comet Silence, leased from Day:  
Bend down out of your Milky Way,  
Press in my palm your stone of light  
And send me singing through the night:  
Through the intimate dark of space  
Which heals our shattered faith, to face  
The barrage of the Day’s Disgrace!

### **II The Clash of Murderous Day**

The clash of murderous Day  
Falls piecemeal away.  
Splinters of cut-glass talk  
Split glitters of wit.  
Windows blindly lit  
Lines of chalk  
On which lost longings walk  
Like taut flamingoes in a treeless clay.

Short time, quick time,  
Time the measure of Day!  
Short purpose, short intent!  
The human will hard bent  
Until  
Time’s river slides away  
Under the mountain of Dark  
And the colonnaded silence  
Overlays Vanity’s cavernous arc  
And all that is left of light  
Is the poor, sad, silly

### VIII Love Knows

Love knows: but will not tell:  
Or does not know, but still  
Obeys in needless need  
The Dark truth of the Deed.

Love knows that only Dark  
Can reveal all: that touch,  
Skinful of eyes, requires  
The melting nakedness  
Which only night can hold  
Within its passionate mould.

Love knows, but will not tell,  
Having lost power and pride  
From dallying too long  
Obscure in the crowded sun.

### IX Envoi: Dear Comet Silence

Dear Comet Silence  
Who, some while hence  
Streaked across my star-shot mind,  
Now in your wake of Dark  
Leave me but one infant spark  
Of peace and kindliness  
If only to let me know  
That all is Done  
And it is time to go.

### X Coda: In the Last Fallible Projection

And yet  
In the last  
Fallible projection  
Of Time and the elliptical universe  
Sliding away,  
Proved however small,

Of indelible  
Glory and ecstasy  
Is all.

— Randall Swingler  
(words selected from "The Map"  
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### The Shadow of the Glen, op.50

Libretto by Bernard Stevens after the play by J. M. Synge.

**Nora Burke**, wife of Dan Burke, aged about 30 years (mezzo-soprano)

**Tramp**, about 40 years (bass)

**Dan Burke**, farmer and herd, about 70 (baritone)

**Michael Dara**, a young herd, about 25, tall and innocent (tenor)

*Scene: The last cottage at the head of a long glen in County Wicklow, Ireland. Cottage kitchen; turf fire on the right; a bed near it against the wall, a body on it covered by a sheet. Door at other end, low table, stools, chairs, 2 glasses, whisky, 2 cups, teapot, cake. Small door near bed. The sound of rain is heard outside. Nora moves about, settling things, lighting candles. Nora glances at bed now and then with uneasy look.*

*Tramp knocks on door. Nora takes a stocking with money from the table and puts it in her pocket.*

TRAMP [outside]: Good evening to you, lady of the house.

NORA: Good evening kindly, stranger, it's a wild night. God bless you, what a time in the rain.



NORA [*with a sort of constraint*]: I'm going a little back to the west, and the young man you're after seeing — I'm wanting him this night, the way he can go down into the glen when the sun is up and tell the people that himself is dead. [*She puts a shawl over her head*] Let you be making yourself easy, and saying a prayer for his soul, and it's not long I'll be coming again.

TRAMP [*moving uneasily*]: Maybe if you'd a piece of grey thread and a sharp needle — I'd be putting a little stitch here and there in my old coat, the time I'll be parying for his soul, and it going up naked to the saints of god.

NORA [*takes a needle and thread from the front of her dress and gives it to him*]: There's the needle, stranger, and I'm thinking you won't be lonesome, for isn't a dead man more company itself than to be sitting alone, and hearing the winds crying, and you not knowing on what thing your mind would stay?

TRAMP: It's true, surely, and the Lord have mercy on us all!

[*Nora goes out*]

TRAMP [*begins stitching one of the tags in his coat*]: 'De profundis clamavi ad te Domini. Domine exaudi vocem miam.'

[*A long whistle is heard outside.*]

DAN [*sitting up in bed, fiercely*]: Ah, the devil mend her... Did you hear that, stranger? Did ever you hear another woman could whistle the like of that with two fingers in her mouth? [*He looks at the table hurriedly*] I'm destroyed with the drouth. Bring me a drop quickly before herself will come back.

TRAMP [*doubtfully*]: Is it not dead you are?

DAN: How would I be dead, and I as dry as a baked bone?

TRAMP [*pouring out the whisky*]: What will herself say if she smells the stuff on you, for I'm thinking it's not for nothing you're letting on to be dead?

DAN: It is not, stranger, she won't be coming near me at all, and it's not long now I'll be letting on, for I've a cramp on my back, and my hip's asleep on me, and there's been a devil's own fly itching my nose. It's near dead I was wanting to sneeze, and you blathering about the rain. [*Impatiently*] Give me that whisky. Would have herself come back before I taste a drop at all? [*Tramp gives him the glass; Dan drinks*] Go over now to that cupboard, and bring me a black stick you'll see in the west corner by the wall.

MICHAEL [*looks over to see that the tramp is asleep; he points to the dead man*]: Was it a hard woman to please you were when you made him your man?

NORA: What way would I live, and I a lone woman, if I didn't marry a man with a bit of a farm, and cows on it, and sheep on the back hills?

MICHAEL [*considering*]: That's true, Nora, maybe it's no fool you were, for there's good grazing on it, and I'm thinking it's a good sum he's left behind.

NORA [*takes the stocking with the money from her pocket and puts it on the table*]: I do be thinking in the long nights it was a big fool I was, Michael Dara, for what use is a bit of a farm with cows on it, and sheep on the back hills, when you be sitting looking out from the door seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog, and hearing nothing but the wind crying, and the streams roaring with the rain.

MICHAEL [*looking at her uneasily*]: What is it ails you this night, Nora Burke? I've heard tell it's the like of that talk you do hear from men, and they after being a great while on the back hills.

NORA [*puts out the money on the table*]: It's a bad night, and a wild night, and isn't it a great while I am at the foot of the black hills, sitting up here, boiling food for himself, food for the brood sow, and baking a cake when the night falls? [*She puts up the money listlessly in little piles*] Isn't it a long while I am sitting here in the winter, and the summer, and the fine spring, with the young growing behind me and the old passing, saying to myself one time, to look on Mary Brien who wasn't that high [*holding out*

MICHAEL [*moves over three of the piles*]: That's three pounds we have now, Nora Burke.

NORA [*in the same voice*]: And saying to myself another time, to look on Peggy Cavanagh, that had the lightest hand at milking a cow, or turning a cake, and there she is now with no teeth in her mouth, and no more hair than you'd see on a bit of a hill after burning the furze.

MICHAEL: That's five pounds and ten notes, a good sum, surely! It's not that way you'll be talking when you marry a young man, Nora Burke, they were saying in the fair my lambs were the best lambs, and I got a grand price.

NORA: What was it you got?

MICHAEL: Twenty pounds for the lot, Nora Burke. We'd do right to wait now till himself will be quiet a while in the Seven Churches, then you'll marry me in the chapel of Rathvanna, and I'll bring up the sheep on the bit of the hill you have on the back mountain, and we won't have anything we'd be afraid to let our minds on when the mist is down.

NORA [*pours him out some whiskey*]: Why should I marry you, Michael Dara? You'll be getting old, and I'll be getting old, and in a little while I'm telling you, you'll be sitting up in your bed, the way himself was sitting, with a shake in your face, and your teeth falling, and the white hair sticking out round you like an old bush, where sheep do be leaping a gap.

[*Dan sits up noiselessly from under the sheet with his hand to his face and his white hair sticking out*

NORA: What good is a grand morning when I'm destroyed surely, and I going out to get my death walking the roads?

TRAMP: You'll not be getting your death with myself, lady of the house and I knowing all the ways a\* man can put food in his mouth. We'll be going now, I'm telling you, and the time you'll be feeling the cold, and the frost, and the great rain, the sun again, and the south wind blowing in the glens, you'll not be sitting up on a wet ditch the way you're after sitting in this place, making yourself look old with looking on each day and it passing you by. You'll be saying one time: 'It's a grand evening, by the grace of God,' and another time: 'It's a wild night, God help us, but it'll pass surely.'

DAN [*goes over to them, crying out impatiently*]: Go out of the door, I'm telling you, and do your blathering blow in the Glen.

[*Nora gathers a few things into her shawl*]

TRAMP [*at the door*]: Come along with me now, lady of the house, it's not my blathering you'll be hearing only, but you'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm; it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a tale of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no old fellows wheezing the like of a sick sheep close to your ear.

with yourself I'll go. [*She goes towards the door, then turns to Dan.*] You think it a grand thing you're after doing with your letting on to be dead, but what is it at all? What way would a woman live in a lonesome place the like of this place, and she not making talk with the men passing? What way will yourself live from this day with none to care you? What is it you'll have now but a black life, Daniel Burke, and it's not long, I'm telling you, till you'll be lying again under the sheet, and you dead surely.

[*Nora goes out with the tramp. Michael slinks after them, but Dan stops him.*]

DAN: Sit down now and take a little taste of the stuff, Michael Dara, there's a great drought on me, and the night is young.

MICHAEL [*comes back to the table*]: It's very dry I am, surely, with the fear of death you put upon me, and I after driving mountain ewes since the turn of the day.

DAN [*throws away his stick*]: I was thinking to strike you, Michael Dara, but you're a quiet man, God help you, I don't mind you at all. [*He pours out two glasses of whisky, gives one to Michael.*] Your good health, Michael Dara.

MICHAEL: God reward you, Daniel Burke, and may you have a long life...

DAN: And may you have a long life and a quiet life...

BOTH: ...and good health with it!



**Neil Mackie** (Michael) was born in Aberdeen, studied at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music & Drama, Glasgow and the Royal College of Music, London and was subsequently awarded a Gulbenkian Fellowship. He made his London debut with the English Chamber Orchestra under Raymond Leppard and has since appeared all over the world. He has been particularly associated with the music of Benjamin Britten and Peter Maxwell Davies and is a noted oratorio singer and recording artist. He was appointed a CBE in 1996 and is now Head of Vocal Studies at the Royal College of Music.

**John Gibbs** (Dan) was born in London and studied at the Royal Academy of Music, continuing his studies on a scholarship with Luigi Ricci in Rome. He made his debut with Welsh National Opera, and went on to sing with Glyndebourne Festival Opera, English National Opera, the New Opera Company, Kent Opera, the English Opera Group and several other companies. He was especially closely associated with the Royal Opera, for which he sang regularly from 1980 until his death, at the age of 48, in 1986. John Gibbs possessed an incisive, full-toned bass-baritone and was especially noted for his gift for comic roles.

**Howard Williams** is currently Head of Conducting at the Welsh College of Music and Drama, Cardiff. He spent six years on the staff of English National

Opera, and among several world premieres he has conducted is his own completion of Bizet's *Ivan IV*. He has conducted both opera and ballet at Covent Garden, appears at many international festivals and has conducted most of the major orchestras of Great Britain and is a frequent guest with several of Europe's leading orchestras. He has a particular connexion with those of Hungary: in 1989 he was appointed Principal Conductor of the Pécs Symphony Orchestra, the first British conductor ever to hold a Hungarian post, and in 1997 was honoured with the Bartók Medal.

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Project Coordinator: Ben Turner  
For further information on Bernard Stevens's music, including a discography:  
<http://www.impulse-music.co.uk/stevens.htm>

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