

Rutland Boughton: Aylesbury Composer and Socialist (1878 - 1960)

Rutland Boughton was born on 23 January 1878 at 18 Bicester Road. He probably attended the nursery school ran by two school ma'ams at 5-9 Parsons Fee. Later he was a scholar at the Grammar School – then in St Mary's Square – and in 1891, as recorded in the census, he was living at 13 Granville Street. He was composing music as a teenager, arranging concerts (some held at the then teetotal Victoria Club for Working Men in Kingsbury) and participating in the musical life of the town. His father and uncle's grocery business at 37 Buckingham Street could not support an expensive musical education, but in 1899 sufficient money was raised for him to attend the Royal College of Music in London. In less than 2 years the money ran out until, following a few more years living in poverty, in 1905 he secured an appointment at the Midland Institute of Music in Birmingham. By this time he had married - his mother-in-law had insisted he marry her daughter, as her reputation had been tarnished by a night out in London!

In Birmingham he began to flourish as a composer of choral music, as a conductor and as a singing teacher, as well as a thinker and writer on music and social issues. There he met the second woman in his life, the artist Christina Walshe, and began to develop his ideas of a specifically English type of opera. These ideas reached fruition with the founding of a commune of artists in Glastonbury in 1912. With minimal financial resources but with enthusiastic support from local amateurs and benefactors as well as professional friends, the Glastonbury Festivals developed into an important aspect of the British operatic scene - an outlet for experimentation and a learning opportunity for young singers. Audiences came from all over the country, including most respected musicians, writers and artists, to hear performances in Glastonbury.

His masterpiece, *The Immortal Hour*, was performed at the Glastonbury Festival in August 1914. The opera was eventually staged in London at the Regent Theatre, Kings Cross, in 1922. It ran for 216 consecutive performances, still a world record, and was revived in 1923, 1926 and 1932. The Winter, Spring and Summer Festivals at

Glastonbury continued until 1926, when in the year of the General Strike, displaying his socialist principles, Boughton put on performances of his Nativity opera, *Bethlehem*, in modern dress, – outraging local opinion; Christ was born in a miner's cottage and Herod was a wicked capitalist! Following this production, financial support for the Glastonbury venture ebbed away and Boughton, with his third "wife" and family, moved to a village, deep in the countryside, near the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire border. He continued composing, completing his Second and Third Symphonies, concertos and chamber music, and finally his cycle of five operas of the King Arthur legend.



The first two parts of the Arthurian Cycle of operas had been presented at Glastonbury - *The Round Table* in 1916 and *The Birth of Arthur* in 1920. The third part *The Lily Maid* received its first performance at Stroud in 1934 whilst the final parts, *Galahad* and *Avalon* completed in 1945 have never been performed. Although *The Queen of Cornwall* composed in 1924 does not form part of Boughton's Arthurian Cycle its story belongs to the same canon. Boughton adapted the libretto from Thomas Hardy's play, the famous tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall. It is this opera that the Rutland Boughton Music Trust is hoping will be the next opera to be recorded. The Trust is based at 25 Bearton Green, Hitchin, Herts. SG5 1UN (tel. 01462 434318). The Honorary Secretary is Mr. Ian Boughton, a grandson of the composer, whom you can contact to make a donation and to be included on the mailing list.

There are now 7 CDs of Boughton's works: some are in stock at Record House at 36 High Street, Aylesbury. They include the operas *The Immortal Hour*; *Bethlehem*; *Symphony No. 3* and the *Oboe Concerto*; *Aylesbury Games*, *Flute Concerto* and *Concerto for String Orchestra*; the *Oboe Quartet No. 1*, *String Quartets - From the Welsh Hills* and *On Greek Folk Songs*; *Songs of Rutland Boughton*; and a CD of *British Trumpet Concertos* which includes Boughton's *Trumpet Concerto*.

Steven Mitchell