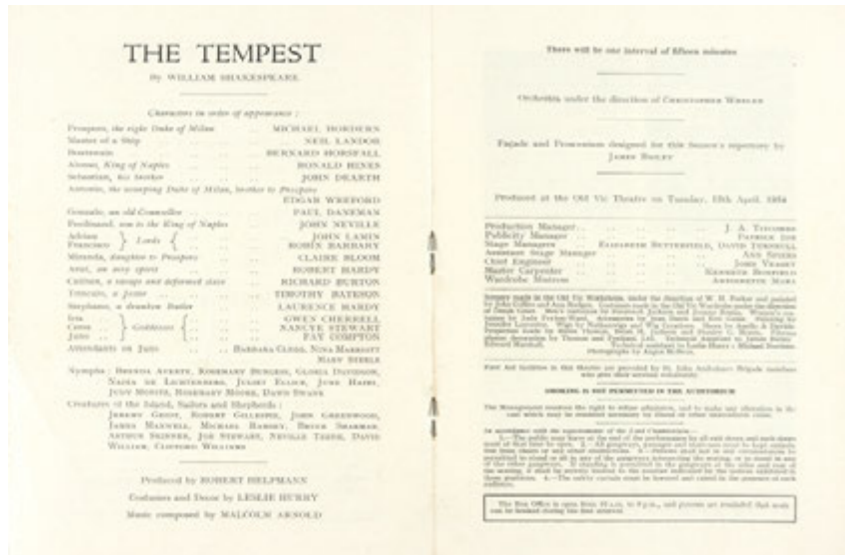


# The Isle is full of Noises: Malcolm Arnold's *Tempest*

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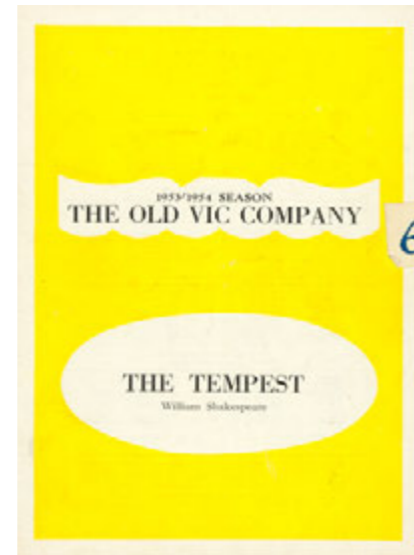
The *Theatre World* critic described the music in the 1954 Old Vic production of *The Tempest* as 'entrancing', a perfect accompaniment to Shakespeare's play, carrying the audience away with delight, wonder and rapture. Such high praise, shared by most of those who saw the play, was a tribute to the work of the young composer Malcolm Arnold, who had been commissioned to undertake the task by the director Robert Helpmann after he had heard Arnold's ballet music to *Homage to the Queen* at Sadler's Wells.

College Library has recently bought all that survives of the manuscript score Arnold handed over, piece by piece, to the conductor and musical director Christopher Whelan during rehearsals. We also have on loan a complete orchestral score of *The Tempest's* incidental music, copied out by Arnold five days before the opening night. These two documents enable us to reconstruct the play's performance history

and explain why it was that the *Theatre World* was so entranced by Arnold's music.

The 1953-54 season at The Old Vic saw the beginning of an ambitious plan to perform all Shakespeare's plays in the First Folio, starting with *Hamlet*, with Richard Burton as the Prince, and taking five years to complete. A strong company was assembled, including Michael Hordern, Fay Compton, Claire Bloom, Robert Hardy and, of course, Richard Burton, who was then establishing his name as a stage actor. *The Tempest* was the last of the season's plays and had its first night on 13th April 1954.

The first problem facing Robert Helpmann was the permanent set erected for the five-year plan: a façade of three Palladian arches, held up by four sturdy pillars, which was ideal for most of the tragedies and histories, but completely unsuitable for the magic of Prospero's island. Helpmann and his designer Leslie Hurry had to disguise

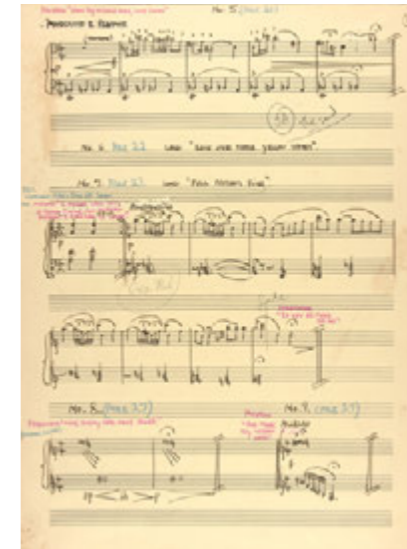


this, and so started the play with Prospero ordering strange-shaped monsters to dress the set and arrange strands of tropical vegetation round the pillars, transforming the stage into a mysterious and beautiful island. Malcolm Arnold's music, therefore, contributed to this transformation by creating a magical sound picture, alluring but strangely sinister, before a word was spoken. Once the set was in place, the monsters disappeared and an enormous storm burst over the theatre with a doomed ship viewed through the middle arch, lit by a single spot. As the frightened passengers cried out and the mariners struggled to keep the boat afloat, it split in two and sank in full view of the audience. Arnold's storm, aided by wind-machines and thunder-sheets, was created by eight musicians playing oboe, clarinet, trumpet, trombone, harp, celesta and many different percussion instruments. It was superbly choreographed by Helpmann and subsided into a quiet conversation in Prospero's cell, in front of

the left arch, as the rightful Duke of Milan, played by Michael Hordern, instructed his daughter Miranda about their past history. This, too, was accompanied by echoes of music, as peace and harmony was restored.

For many critics, Ariel stole the show. The young Robert Hardy was painted sulphur-yellow, naked apart from a small decorated thong, his hair stiffly blown back. He moved with balletic grace and spoke and sang with an other-worldly charm, like the airy spirit he was intended to be. Hardy made much of the music Arnold wrote for his four songs. The composer carefully went through each one with him at the piano, making sure that 'Come unto these Yellow Sands' had the right lure and 'Full Fathom Five' a tingling melancholy. But Arnold did more than set Shakespeare's songs to his own musical ideas. He also wrote bars of music to cover the entrances and exits of many of the characters. Thus Ariel's first entrance was to the plucking of a harp, and Caliban lumbered in to a slow tune on the trombone with bass drum accompaniment. Caliban was probably the only disappointment of the production, a lovable moon-calf, played as a broadly comic character by Richard Burton.

Malcolm Arnold's music, therefore, fulfilled a number of different functions in the play: it set the mood of a scene; it helped to create character; it gave a new beauty to Shakespeare's songs. But its most original use was in providing an accompaniment to the dialogue in a number of scenes. Thus, at the appearance of the magical banquet at the end of Act 3, the villainous men of sin spoke in tandem with Arnold's bold, discordant music. Likewise, almost all Miranda and Ferdinand's scenes were accompanied by music, particularly effective where Ferdinand was moving logs and where the lovers were discovered playing chess. This, of course, required careful rehearsal to make sure the blend of voice and instruments was perfect, but it succeeded so well that Miranda and Ferdinand, often merely rather dull young lovers, were given greater prominence.



In Helpmann's production they were proclaimed as the new generation who would repudiate the sins and neglect of their fathers in restoring order and prosperity to Milan and Naples. Claire Bloom and John Neville made the most of this opportunity and both gave memorable performances.

Arnold found it easy to work with Helpmann (whom others found tricky) and was clearly

inspired by the vision of *The Tempest* he was asked to interpret. The two of them, aided by Christopher Whelan, made a good team, each man sparking ideas from the others. The surviving manuscript scores show that throughout rehearsal there were changes and modifications and that Arnold was often composing late into the night to get fresh accompaniments ready for the next day.

There is much to learn from Arnold's fascinating manuscript scores, which are freely available to members of the Eton community in College Library and to the general public in College Library. It is also hoped that some time before the end of the Malcolm Arnold Project (a three-year, joint venture by the Eton Music Department and College Library) in December 2018 some of *The Tempest* music may be played at Eton, so that a modern audience may get some small idea of what excited the audience at the Old Vic way back in 1954.

**Michael Meredith**  
Curator Modern Collection



Richard Burton, Michael Hordern and Claire Bloom in *The Tempest*

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