

SYBIL

Synopsis

Sybil is an opera in two acts ostensibly set in early Victorian England, but it can be updated in production. It is a story of love set against the ever-relevant misunderstanding and conflict between rich and poor, haves and have-nots. Act I is a darkly ironic social comedy. Act II soon becomes violent, with catastrophic consequences.

Act I

Prologue A privileged young man, Charles Egremont, watches a seeming vision of a beautiful young woman performing centuries old rites at dusk in the ruins of the old Marney Abbey. He hears her companions sing 'to Mowbray' and vows to find her again.

Scene 1 The scene changes to the 1837 Derby - bets are laid, the race is run, and Egremont loses more than he has.

Scene 2 In a short spoken domestic scene with his mother, the Dowager Lady Marney, Charles Egremont tells of his gambling debts. She says she'll pay, but he must stand for parliament in the 'family borough', as there'll soon be an election following the impending death of King William IV. She tells him that his estranged brother, Lord Marney, will pay the election expenses to maintain the family honour.

Interlude The funeral march for King William forms an interlude, followed immediately by the **Final Election Rally**, showing the bribing of electors and Egremont's victory.

Scene 3 The scene changes to the new Marney Abbey, home of Lord Marney and his countess Arabella. In a short spoken dialogue with his wife, his adamantine arrogance is immediately obvious. Egremont, the Dowager and a friend of Arabella's called Mary Pointsett arrive together with the pusillanimous local vicar. The conversation is dominated by Marney's arrogance. The three ladies, followed by the vicar (who is contemptuously ordered to join them) move up stage to sing round a piano a folk song about a girl who 'must and will get married'. This forms the background to a bizarre and tense dialogue between the brothers, dominated by the elder who evidently never had any intention of paying the substantial election expenses, but instead means to arrange for his brother to marry the heiress of Mowbray, Lady Joan. Egremont is flabbergasted.

Scene 4 We now move to the 'other nation', the hovel of an impoverished weaver and his family in the northern industrial town of Mowbray. At dawn, while his wife Mary still sleeps, Philip Warner complains more or less stoically of how the advent of machines, together with cheap child labour to operate them, has reduced his income to a pittance. His wife wakes and begins an incessant complaint about their poverty. As Mary continues her complaints, Sybil enters with a gift of food and other things from her father Walter Gerard, a prosperous senior mill worker who has heard of their plight. The conscientious vicar of Mowbray arrives on his rounds, accompanied by Egremont disguised as journalist Charles Franklin. Egremont recognizes Sybil as the young woman he saw at dusk in the ruins. He begins to talk to her, but when she asks if he knows the Marney district well, he panics and dissembles, denying any connection with the place when she complains that the people of that district suffer cruelly at the hands of the owners of the land. The Warners are left to make the most of their basket of food.

Postlude to Act I. The act closes with a monumental choral postlude, in which the chorus loudly sings Chartist words¹ in often eight part harmony and seems to be a force to be reckoned with.

Act II

Scene 5 The Marneys and Egremont are at Mowbray Castle in order that Egremont should become engaged to Lady Joan. In an opening recitative, Arabella suggests that Charles doesn't really like Joan, to which her husband replies: 'What in God's name has that got to do with it? One doesn't have to like somebody to marry them.' Egremont enters and, as Arabella leaves unnoticed, is aggressively berated by his brother for not trying harder for Lady Joan. As he sees Joan and her younger, more humble sister Maud approaching with Arabella, Marney tells his brother to get on with it and leaves. Before the ladies arrive, Egremont briefly dreams of another love. Egremont clearly prefers talking to the younger sister, who is given to good works. Joan shows herself to be haughty and contemptuous, while Arabella reveals a flash of irony. Charles has made no progress with Joan as his brother returns and the ladies leave. When Charles worries about the state of the people in the district around Marney, his brother becomes incandescent with rage.

Interlude with Riot There is a riot at a truck shop. (Truck was a system whereby mill and other workers were paid, without any say in the matter, in credit at the shop rather than in cash.) As women shoppers threateningly complain of shoddy, overpriced goods, the shop owner's son barricades himself inside and shoots dead a child and wounds her mother. The women burn the shop down with the young man still inside. Watching was Stephen Morley, a rabble-rousing journalist, surrounded by musical cliché, who is in love with Sybil.

Scene 6 In a melodrama, Stephen describes the riot to Sybil and her father, with apparent glee. He shows obvious signs of jealousy when Sybil says that 'Mr Franklin' (the disguised Charles Egremont) will be able to write about this to show how the people suffer. They all leave and Egremont enters. In a lushly accompanied and somewhat self-indulgent aria, Egremont hopes that some day Sybil can become his. Sybil enters walking her dog.² She's clearly fond of Charles, but embarrasses him when she says how well he as a journalist will be able to describe how badly the people are treated. After she has left, he bemoans his need for deception and is sure that Stephen Morley suspects. At this point he is viciously attacked by a shadowy figure, who is only prevented from killing him by the return of Sybil, led by her dog. Sybil's father, Walter Gerard follows and sees someone apparently hiding in the shadows. When this is revealed as Stephen, he merely asks for assistance, but the dog attacks Stephen, who runs off. Father and daughter help Egremont to walk home.

Interlude A four minute orchestral prestissimo suggesting phrenetic activity and fire-raising, which may be represented by an animated cartoon film.

Scene 7 In this scene, the people arrive, singing a marching song to Chartist words.¹ Stephen in a *rapatriative* sets out to rouse them to revolt, with the marching song as a recurring refrain. Walter Gerard is trying to calm things, when Marney arrives with several militiamen. He mistakingly identifies Gerard as the dangerous ringleader, and calmly shoots him dead. The enraged crowd sets upon and kills Marney before he has time to realize what's happening, but then flees in panic from the equally alarmed militiamen. As dusk falls, Sybil and Egremont come on stage without seeing the two bodies. Sybil is nervous, but Egremont is trying to calm her when he notices and recognizes the body of his brother, and then reveals his true identity. Sybil is torn between anger at Charles' lying and sympathy for the death of a brother. Stephen quietly approaches and tells how Marney killed Sybil's father, then he shows them the body and contemptuously addresses Egremont as the new Lord Marney. After a brief trio in which they each express their thoughts, Sybil dismisses Stephen for his penchant for violence and Charles, more kindly, because she wishes to be alone with her father, over whose body she sings a lament.

Interlude A very simple and often unison diatonic choral setting of three verses from Shelley's *Masque of Anarchy* sung by the people as two or three years pass. The nostalgic musical style suggests the period in which Shelley was writing.

Epilogue It is a year or two later and we are again in the ruins of the old abbey. Charles and Sybil meet and become exuberantly reconciled. The three ladies, the Dowager, Arabella and her friend Mary Pointsett, make ironic comments from the wings about Charles' being bound to give away the family fortune to this girl on whom he dotes, and thus bring ruin upon them all. The duet becomes gently sensual. The final comment from the wings is a non-specific threat from Stephen, before the duet continues for a further minute.

¹ The words for the chorus that ends Act I and for the unison marching song in Scene 7 come from *An Anthology of Chartist Literature* published in Moscow in 1956.

² The presence of Sybil's dog may readily be suggested by mimed gestures from the characters on stage or perhaps computer imagery might be used to give a semi-realistic representation of the dog. Alternatively, there could be an actor or dancer wearing a dog mask.

SYBIL: A NATION DIVIDED

an opera in two acts very loosely based on aspects of the novel *Sybil* or *The Two Nations* by Benjamin Disraeli, but with major excursions from the source, especially in the later stages.

words and music
by
David Ward

The events depicted in the novel begin in 1837. The opera need not be staged as a period drama.

Cast (*smaller roles should be doubled and trebled, or be given to early career singers or to members of the chorus*)

Sybil Gerard (daughter of Walter Gerard, with whom she now lives, but she was partly brought up in a convent after the death of her mother)	Lyric Soprano
Charles Egremont (a young man of privileged background)	Lyric Tenor
Lord Marney (Egremont's elder brother, George)	Character Tenor
Dowager Lady Marney (the brothers' mother)	Dramatic Mezzo
Arabella (George Marney's countess)	Soprano
Mary Pointsett (a friend of Arabella's)	Mezzo
Mary Warner (Philip Warner's wife)	Lyric Mezzo
Philip Warner (an impoverished weaver)	Cavalier Baritone
Amelia (Philip Warner's young daughter - to seem a child on stage)	Soprano
Lady Joan (a very grand lady)	Mezzo
Lady Maud (Lady Joan's more humble - and prettier - sister)	Soprano
Stephen Morley (a young journalist and political agitator)	Character Tenor
Walter Gerard (Sybil's father, a senior mill worker)	(Lyric) Baritone
Slimsey (the pusillanimous vicar of Marney)	Baritone
Rev Aubrey St Lys (the more independent minded vicar of Mowbray)	Baritone
Bookie	Tenor
1st Racegoer	Soprano
2nd Racegoer	Mezzo
3rd Racegoer	Tenor
4th Racegoer	Baritone
5th Racegoer	Baritone
Waker-Up (employed by the mill workers to rouse them)	Baritone

Mixed Chorus (sometimes in eight parts) representing **Racegoers, Election Canvassers & Women Whose Men are Electors, Women at a Truck Shop** and **The People** (the *Turba*).

3 - 12 Supernumeraries (or members of the chorus in non-singing roles) representing (in different scenes) household servants, two shopkeepers, up to six militiamen and several stretcher-bearers.

Orchestra

3 Flutes - 2nd doubling Alto Flute 1 and Piccolo 2, 3rd doubling Piccolo 1 and Alto Flute 2

2 Oboes

Cor Anglais

2 Clarinets in B \flat

Bass Clarinet (with low C [sounding B \flat])

2 Bassoons

Double Bassoon

4 Horns in F

3 Trumpets in C and B \flat

2 Trombones

Bass Trombone

Tuba doubling Cimbasso

Timpani

4/5 Percussion (Triangle, Clashed Cymbals, small & large Suspended Cymbals, Rivet Cymbal, Snare Drum, Tenor Drum, Bass Drum, Tubular Bells, Tam-Tam, Whip)

Xylophone, Glockenspiel, Vibraphone (a 5th player plays Xyl & Glock, the Vibr is played by one of the 4)

Piano doubling Celesta

Harp (Act II only)

Strings (at least fairly full - normally not less than 8, 8, 6, 6, 4 and when possible 14, 12, 10, 8, 6)

Conventional transpositions are written.

On stage

1 Trombone (*who takes part in the action. This trombonist might be an imported soloist who attends a similar rehearsal schedule to that of the singers.*)

If practical the short piece for solo cello and piano may be played on stage in Scene 2 (instead of in the pit).

A marching drum (a military side drum) is used on stage at the end of the Election Rally.

A small piano may be played on stage in Scene 3 by one of the ladies (instead of the pit piano).

An E \flat clarinet and a marching drum are used on stage for the first part of Scene 7.

The stage trombone is a musical commentator: sometimes apparently participating, as in the marching tunes or in the 'Come on, my horse' music of the race scene, at other times making sardonic comment - and always on the edge of the action, keeping clear when things get dangerous.

Total Duration: nearly 3 hours (not including the interval)

Act I: about 1¼ hours

Act II: about 1¼ hours