

Notes

The Garden of the Sun tells the story of the legendary ancient Sumerian king Gilgamesh and his furious rejection but final acceptance of the inevitability of his mortality. It starts in gloom, rage and despair, but ends in transcendence, albeit with a slight twist.

Although it has some of the characteristics of an oratorio, in particular several sections of flashbacks and indirect narrative, the piece is intended to be staged as an opera, but not necessarily in a theatre. It might lend itself to a 'concert staging' in a church or other suitable non-theatre venue, with simple action and movement (including the four minute dance of the snake), plus lighting and projections. In such a performance the down-stage area should be as close as practical to the audience in front of the orchestra.

The quality, stamina and stage presence of the baritone who takes on the role of Gilgamesh will be crucial to the success or failure of any performance of the piece. The stage presence of the mezzo who sings Ishtar is also crucial, although her role is fragmented and she only sings for a total of about eight minutes in the two hour piece. She has the final silent gesture.

Synopsis

Act I (c.26 minutes)

Scene 1 A burial chamber with Gilgamesh and the Chorus. The warrior Enkidu is dead and Gilgamesh rages at mortality. The death of Enkidu is punishment from Ishtar, Goddess of Love and War, whose love Gilgamesh has rejected, thus insulting the Gods. A few minutes of beauty tell how Ishtar came in 'the silver cape of the summer moon' before she is spurned and unleashes her vengeance with the Bull of Heaven.

Interlude: The Battle with the Bull of Heaven The Chorus narrates the battle, how Enkidu leapt the horns and how Gilgamesh stuck the bull with his sword.

Scene 2 Outside the burial chamber. Gilgamesh is in despair and calls for Enkidu to 'come back.' But Ishtar has taken Enkidu and mocks Gilgamesh's wish to find immortality. The three Commentators sing a lyrical motive that becomes important through the piece as they tell of one man, Utnapishtim, who has 'found immortal life in the Garden of the Sun.' Gilgamesh sets out on his quest.

Act II (c.33 minutes and to follow Act I without a break)

Scene 1 The three Scorpions guard the gate to the passage under the Mountains of the Sun. Gilgamesh, dressed in rags of jackal skins, appears on his quest to find The Garden of the Sun and the secret of immortality. The Scorpions mock him in his rags, but then let him pass, warning that 'No man has yet survived the night, from dusk till dawn, across the path we guard.'

Interlude: The Journey Under the Mountains of the Sun Gilgamesh is dimly seen struggling forwards as the orchestra plays, plus some comments from Chorus and Scorpions.

Scene 2 As Gilgamesh reaches the light of day, Siduri, the nymph of the wine harvest, is astonished to see him come out from under the mountains: 'No man's done that before.' When he begins to boast of his achievements, she mocks and tries to seduce with wine, flesh and lust. She sings a florid coloratura with cabaret accompaniment. When he demands to be shown the way to the Garden of the Sun, she warns that 'The Gods keep all that knowledge to themselves.' When he insists and becomes aggressive she gives in and directs him to the 'Dark Sea of Death' and the ferryman.

Scene 3 The ferryman, the lugubriously sardonic undertaker Urshanabi, spies Gilgamesh and wonders 'What have we here?' His basso profundo is accompanied by *extreme consonance*, slowly wandering major and minor triads. Gilgamesh is 'terrified of death' at the same time boasting of his killing the Bull of Heaven. The ferryman mocks sardonically, but with encouragement from off-stage Chorus and Commentators he agrees to ferry Gilgamesh across the Sea of Death to The Garden of the Sun.

INTERVAL

Act III (c.55 minutes)

Prologue The story of The Great Flood, that is perhaps ancient history at the time of Gilgamesh. 'When the King of the Gods despaired of human selfishness and war he sent the Flood to sweep away mankind.' But 'The God of Wisdom chose one man... .. to save the seed of all creation.' This man was Utnapishtim, an earlier version of Noah. The Commentators and Chorus together with the orchestra tell the story, while Ishtar 'despairs of the folly of the Gods.' Utnapishtim and his wife are rewarded with everlasting life.

Scene 1 Gilgamesh is delivered by the ferryman to The Garden of the Sun and falls to his knees: 'My search is done.' Utnapishtim, who sings in a highly stylized manner, squints quizzically at Gilgamesh. Urshanabi explains that he is a great king as Utnapishtim mocks his rags. The now exhausted Gilgamesh begs for everlasting life, but the other two tell him that 'even a king has to take a last walk in a shroud.' As he desperately repeats 'Not so, NOT SO...' he collapses downstage centre as the others leave.

Scene 2 The same place. Gilgamesh raises his head and begs 'One chance, grant me one chance.' The off-stage Chorus, with each phrase repeated on-stage by the three Commentators, sings that a council of the Gods may hear his appeal if he can fight sleep for seven nights. The exhausted Gilgamesh immediately falls into a deep sleep. To slow, almost minimalist music the Commentators mime the baking of seven loaves, one for each night that Gilgamesh remains in a deep sleep. An image of the loaves is projected onto a screen as each day's mould grows, so that by the end of the seven days and nights the first loaf is completely covered in mould. Gilgamesh awakes, and when he realizes that he has failed, he throws off his rags to reveal royal robes underneath: 'The magic robes would live forever but the man inside must die.' Then just before he says farewell, he's told of the Flower of Immortality at the bottom of the Sea of Death. Gilgamesh relates how, protected by his magic robes, he dives for the sacred bloom and brings it to the surface. But the Snake eases herself aboard...

Dance of the Snake In a tango the Snake, a dancer, eats the Flower and sloughs her skin and is reborn anew. In her newborn, resplendent glory she then dances a celebratory Tarantella, now, too late, watched by Gilgamesh.

Scene 3 Once more outside the burial chamber of Act I. The Chorus sings in celebration of the return of Gilgamesh who swells with pride. This quickly deflates at 'the bitter story of my quest.' His mood soon changes again, but without the previous hubris '... The spur to defy the mountains and the seas: this is the pearl of immortality.' Ishtar makes a sudden entrance: 'But one day you shall yet be mine, and lie with me upon a bed of clay.' She storms away. The off-stage Chorus is still celebrating the return of the King, while for the Commentators '... We all shall meet in the Garden of the Sun.' Siduri, the wine nymph, briefly appears up-stage to sing: 'Forget tomorrow, get drunk and never care.' With her is the Snake and a brief echo of her tarantella. They disappear as suddenly as they appeared. The music becomes transcendent, leading eventually to extreme consonance as Gilgamesh kneels and sings: 'No longer can you make me weep for human destiny, nor search the world to find its remedy, nor call my death my enemy.' Ishtar has quietly reappeared as Gilgamesh lies down, as if for sleep. In the last gesture of the piece, she drops her cloak over Gilgamesh to a quiet, wide spread C major chord.