

At the Hawk's Well

Chamber Opera

by Edward Lambert

adapted from the play by W. B. Yates

Characters

THE GUARDIANS OF THE WELL

soprano S1

mezzo-soprano S2

counter-tenor (or contralto) A

CUCHULAIN, a young warrior

tenor T

AN OLD MAN

bass-baritone B

THE HAWK

dancer (*optional*)

Instruments

2 oboes, 2 horns, strings, percussion (marimba & drums), harp

The action takes place during the Irish Heroic Age. The Three Guardians of the Well conjure a scene of a parched mountainous landscape in which they attend a dried-up water source. An Old Man has been living by the well for fifty years in the hope of drinking the water for, when it flows, he who tastes it will gain eternal life. We learn that the stream has only ever appeared when he was asleep: three times he has woken to find the stones wet but the well dry. The young hero Cuchulain arrives on the scene possessing, in the optimism of youth, the ambition of finding immortality. Suddenly, the scream of a hawk is heard and its great wings cast a shadow. Cuchulain remarks that he saw the bird on his journey here; the Old Man recognises this as a sign that the water will soon flow. When the Guardians sing again, however, the Old Man is lulled to sleep. Cuchulain is entranced by the appearance of the Hawk only to realise when it vanishes that the water has been and gone and the Old Man has died. He resolves to stay and wait for immortality. The Guardians draw a moral from the tale: wisdom is granted to those that live humble lives and are content to face death.

AT THE HAWK'S WELL

The scene is a barren, mountainous landscape in which is a dried up well or spring.

GUARDIANS OF THE WELL

(to the audience, while clearing the well of leaves)

We call to the eye of the mind
A well long choked up and dry
And boughs long stripped by the wind;
And we call to the mind's eye
Pallor of an ivory face,
Its lofty dissolute air,
A man climbing up to a place
The salt sea wind has swept bare.

The boughs of the hazel shake,
The sun goes down in the west.
The heart would be always awake,
The heart would turn to its rest.

The mountainside grows dark;
The withered leaves of the hazel
Half choke the dry bed of the well;
We, the guardians of the well, sit
Upon the old grey stone at its side;
Our heavy eyes know nothing, or but look upon stone.
"Why should I sleep?" the heart cries,
"For the wind, the salt wind, the sea wind,
Is beating a cloud through the skies;
I would wander always like the wind."

The OLD MAN enters and gathers sticks and leaves to make a fire

That old man climbs up hither,
Who has been watching by his well
These fifty years.
He is all doubled up with age;
The old thorn-trees are doubled so
Among the rocks where he is climbing.
Shivering with cold, he has taken up
The fire-stick and now the dry sticks take the fire,
And now the fire leaps up and shines
Upon the hazels and the empty well.

"O wind, o salt wind, o sea wind"
Cries the heart, "it is time to sleep;
Why wander and nothing to find?
Better grow old and sleep."

OLD MAN (*turning to the Guardians*)

Why don't you speak to me?
Why don't you say:
"Are you not weary gathering those sticks?
Are not your fingers cold?" You have not one word,
To-day you are as stupid as a fish,
No, worse, worse, being less lively and as dumb.
(*He goes up to the Guardians*)
Your eyes are dazed and heavy. If the Sidhe¹
Must have guardians to clean out the well
they might choose those
That can be pleasant and companionable
Once in the day. Why do you stare like that?
Do you know anything?
It drives this old man crazy
To look all day upon these broken rocks,
And ragged thorns, these stupid faces,
And speak and get no answer.

CUCHULAIN enters

CUCHULAIN

Then speak to me,
For youth is not more patient than old age;
And though I have trod the rocks for half a day
I cannot find what I am looking for.

OLD MAN

Who speaks? Who comes, so suddenly into this place
Where nothing thrives?

CUCHULAIN

I am named Cuchulain, I am Sualtim's son.²
I have an ancient house beyond the sea.

¹ [Note: The Sidhe are an ancient divine race (pronounced "She") that had once possessed Ireland. Conquered by other gods, they became invisible and made their home in the hills and countryside.]

² [Note: The warrior Sualtim, a vague and shadowy figure of Irish myth, was held to be Cuhulin's mortal father. Cuchulain claimed supernatural descent as the son of Lugh, the Sun-God.]

OLD MAN

What mischief brings you hither?
the shedding of men's blood,
Or the love of women?

CUCHULAIN

A rumour has led me:
I spread sail, and with a lucky wind
Crossed charmed waves, and found this shore.

OLD MAN

There is no house to sack among these hills
Nor beautiful woman to be carried off.

CUCHULAIN

You can, it may be, lead me to what I seek:
a well wherefrom, they say, he who drinks
Of that miraculous water lives for ever.

OLD MAN

And do you think so great a gift is found
just by climbing a steep hill? O, folly of youth,
Why should that hollow place fill up for you,
That will not fill for me? I have lain in wait
For more than fifty years, to find it empty,

CUCHULAIN

So it seems there is some moment when the water fills it.

OLD MAN

A secret moment that the holy shades
That dance upon the desolate mountain know,
And not a living man.

CUCHULAIN

I will stand here and wait.
Why should luck desert me now?

OLD MAN

No! Go from this accursed place!
This place belongs to me. I came like you
young in body and mind, blown by the wind.
The well was dry, I sat at its edge,
awaited the miraculous flood
While the years passed and withered me.

I snared the birds for food
And drunk the rain, and neither in dark nor shine
Wandered too far away to have heard the plash,
And yet the guardians have deceived me. Thrice
I have awakened from a sudden sleep
To find the stones were wet.
Leave the well to me, for it belongs
To all that's old and withered.

CUCHULAIN

No, I stay. My luck is strong...
(The scream of a hawk is heard)
That bird again! As I came here
A great grey hawk swept down from the sky
as if to tear me apart or blind me or smite me.

OLD MAN

The Woman of the Sidhe herself,
The mountain witch, the unappeasable shadow.
There falls a curse
On all who gaze on her unmoistened eyes;
So get you gone, for not a man alive
Has so much luck that he can play with it.
Those that have long to live should fear the most,
The old are cursed already.

CUCHULAIN

You seem as withered as the leaves
as though no longer you had part in life.
(The hawk's cries are heard again)
That cry again!

OLD MAN

The Guardians cry out,
the life slips through their veins.
The water will come and be gone again;
That was the sign. O, get you gone,
If I do not drink it now, will ever not;

CUCHULAIN

We shall both drink,
even if but a few drops, share them.

OLD MAN

Swear that I may drink the first;

I've been watching all my life.

CUCHULAIN

The Guardians fix their eyes upon us!
I cannot bear their eyes, birds, women, or witches;
they are not of this world, nor moist, nor faltering;
the eyes of a hawk.

GUARDIANS

O God, protect us now from a deathless body!

*(The HAWK enters and dances: CUCHULAIN is entranced.
The OLD MAN is lulled to sleep)*

GUARDIANS

We hear water splash; it comes, it comes;
Look where it glitters!

GUARDIANS

O God, protect us now from a deathless body!

Look where it glitters!
Cuchulain hears the splash;
Look, he turns his head.

The HAWK has vanished

GUARDIANS

God, protect us!

(CUCHULAIN wakes and examines the well which has already run dry)

He has lost what may not be found
Till men heap his burial-mound
And all the history ends.

CUCHULAIN

(To the OLD MAN, who has died)
The water flowed and ceased while you slept:
Those accursed creatures have stolen your life!

GUARDIANS

He might have lived at his ease,
An old dog's head on his knees,
Among his children and friends.

CUCHULAIN

(to the Guardians)

I shall not leave this place
Till I have grown immortal!

GUARDIANS

Come to me, human faces,
Familiar memories;
I have found hateful eyes
Among the desolate places,
Unfaltering, unmoistened eyes.

"The man that I praise,"
Cries out the empty well,
"Lives all his days
Where a hand on the bell
Can call the milch cows
To the comfortable door of his house.
Who but an idiot would praise
Dry stones in a well?"

Folly alone I cherish,
I choose it for my share;
Being but a mouthful of air,
I am content to perish;
I am but a mouthful of Sweet air.

"The man that I praise,"
Cries out the leafless tree,
"Has married and stays
By an old hearth, and he
On naught has set store
But children. and dogs on the floor.
Who but an idiot would praise
A withered tree?"

O lamentable shadows,
Obscurity of strife!
I choose a pleasant life
Among indolent meadows;
Wisdom must live a bitter life.

(The scene fades)

