



Theseus and the Minotaur

An opera for children

by

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Introduction

Theseus and the Minotaur is a short one-act opera for children, telling the ancient Greek myth of how Theseus slew the Minotaur, saving the Athenians from the regular sacrifice of young men and women, but at the same time showing infidelity by not keeping his promises either to his father or to Ariadne who helped him through the Labyrinth.

Although it is not essential to perform it as a continuous piece, it is designed to flow from one section to the next without any breaks. Performed in this way, the opera lasts about 45 minutes.

Apart from the Overture and Celebration (Dance), all the sections are, essentially, songs. Most vocal parts are for groups of singers, but some are labelled as being for “Theseus” or “Ariadne”, “Aegeus”, etc. These can either be sung by soloists, or by small groups (even if the acting of that part is done by one child). Note that three or more voices will blend better than just two, so use at least three children in such a group.

The Overture can be used to set the scene with movement and dance. The “Celebration” dance is written in such a way as to make it possible to extend it to almost any length. The main section, between the repeat marks, can be divided in the centre (at the double bar line) and the two halves can be repeated in any order and as often as required, before moving on to the last couple of bars which constitute the coda.

The Labyrinth is the most difficult to perform, but by rehearsing the individual chants, of which it consists in the main, without the accompanying music, children can quite easily learn the whole piece. There is a note on how to learn The Labyrinth following this introduction.

From an educational point of view, the use of motifs and themes throughout the opera can be explored with the children. The main motifs used are:

- The dotted bass rhythm which represents the Minotaur and his influence
- The “sea-music” used for all the sea voyages
- The end of the theme of the Farewell song which recurs when there are reminders of Theseus’s promise to his father to change the colour of the sail

There are, of course, other thematic links which children can find and discuss.

How to Learn and Rehearse The Labyrinth

Reading the music

The score is conventionally set out in the main, but there are two symbols which you need to know in order to learn and perform this music correctly:



Notes with cross-heads - these notes are whispered - the words are whispered in the rhythm of the notes.



Notes with triangular-heads - these notes are spoken - the words are chanted in speech in the rhythm of the notes.

Learn the three chants

1. The first chant is for the words "The Labyrinth, the Labyrinth, the lair of the Minotaur". These words are whispered or spoken in the same rhythm every time. Learn it together, both in whispered and spoken form initially and then split it up so that Group 1 speaks it and Group 2 whispers it as an echo (as in the music). Do it to the accompaniment last of all.
2. The second chant is for the words "You may get in but you can't get out". Learn it in the same way as for the first chant. Note that towards the end, the words for this chant change to "Unwind the thread, Ariadne's thread".
3. The third chant is "Can you see him? Can you hear him? Can you smell him?". This is in two rhythms:
 - Straight - the first time this comes, the words are whispered in even crotchets.
 - Dotted - later the phrase is broken up into dotted rhythms and this happens while the straight version continues.

Learn both forms with all groups in unison and then learn to do both forms at once. Then bring the groups in at the right points as in the music.

Group 1 then moves to singing the phrase starting on the note F. This note is given to the singers in the accompaniment at the same time as they change to singing. Teach the group to listen for it and then to join in on the right notes. Do this in isolation to start with and later put it together with the other group.

Group 2 then moves to singing the phrase starting on the note A^b. Again, this note is given to the group in the accompaniment. They could also pick it up by listening to Group 1 and learning how to move from the sequence F.-.-.G.A^b.-.-.G directly to A^b.-.-.B^b.C.-.-.B^b. Learn it in isolation, then with Group 1 singing their version (which starts on F).