

Cecil Armstrong Gibbs (1889-1960)

**Odysseus: symphony in four movements (1937-8)
for soprano and baritone soli, mixed chorus and orchestra
(words by Mordaunt Currie)**

BBC Concert Orchestra
London Oriana Choir
conducted by David Drummond

Susan Gritton soprano
Mark Stone baritone

i. *Escape from Calypso*

Chorus

The story of Odysseus, king of craft,
Athene's chosen, wanderer of the seas,
We sing.
On high Olympus sat the gods in feast,
Ambrosia-filled with nectar at their side
And joy and laughter echoing thro' the hall.
Till Zeus looked forth across the ways of men,
And spied far down upon a lonely isle
Where no ship touched and never trader came
The lonely figure of an idle man
Who stared far out across the heaving sea,
And cried aloud in bitterness for home.
Then fell a silence in that ancient hall;
And thro' the silence like a silver stream
Athene's words fell on the great god's ear.
"Father of gods, how long shall this thing be?"
"Shall this man bear for ever reckless wrath,"
"Nor find at last the comfort of his home,"
"His faithful wife and ever-searching son?"
And Zeus looked back and counted forth the years
Since Ilium fell, ten weary years of toil.
And With a nod that thundered down the skies
Summoned the messenger, the son of Maia,
And bad him forth with his divine decree.
Swift as an arrow from the hill-top sped
The graceful god flashed thro' th' immortal air,
And, as a star that drops in fiery death,
Landed like flame upon that rosy isle.
And now his voice, sweet as a shepherd's reed,
Called thro' the isle in accents calm and sure,
"Hero and nymph, come forth and heed ye well"
"The word of Zeus, father of gods and men,"
"Lest worse befall you than my tongue dare tell."
She came downcast and mutinous of mouth,
The nymph Calypso, queen of that sweet isle,
Who seven long years had held as captive there
The great Odysseus, craftiest of kings.
He followed swift: came with an eager stride,
With sparkling eyes and ears that ached to learn
Release at last, to praise within his heart
Wisest Athene, guardian of his fate.
And she, the nymph, cried with a bitter tongue,

Soprano solo

"I know you, Hermes, messenger of gods,"
"I know your purpose, I too am divine."
"Ah, jealous gods, with all a world to rule,"
"Still must ye rob the lonely of her prize,"
"And take from me, the loneliest of maids,"

"The man I love, and send him forth to meet"
"Unnumbered sorrows, but to find at last"
"An ageing wife and a grief-stricken home."
"The fates decree, I cannot strive with fate."

Chorus

He bowed his head and soared into the skies,
And while Odysseus, the wise hero, stared
And clapped his hand against his naked thigh
For fear this thing was but a dream, she spoke
In mournful accents:

Soprano solo

"Ay, poor headstrong fool,"
"That might have lived immortal at my side"
"The hour is come, there shall be no delay."
"Go, fetch you driftwood from the shining beach,"
"And cut down tree-trunks from the island's heart,"
"And I will aid you till the raft be built,"
"That so thou may'st escape to grief and death."

Chorus

Fair rose the sun upon that longed-for day,
Light as a lily set within a pool,
The raft of magic floated o'er the tide,
As great Odysseus with an eager shout
Trimmed the small sail, and crying forth, "Farewell"
Set out at last on his long journey home.
The Tritons sang, and round the dolphins played,
Fair blew the wind and calm the ocean slept.
Till from his soundless palace, waking suddenly,
The Sea-god rose and spied his ancient foe!
The clouds drove thick, the North-wind leaped and tore,
The lightning jagged, the thunder crashed and smote;
The sea rose up in one great heaving wall
And swept away into its foaming heart
Man, raft and sail down, down into the deep.
Then like an arrow from the shining peak
Athene dived, and set about his form
Her strength divine. Once more Odysseus rose
And clutching one stray plank the goddess gave
Was driven so to the Phaeacian isle.
And staggering forth upon that sandy shore,
Fell like one dead and knew not space nor time.

Voices and laughter, mellow as the bells
That ring forth sheep on those Aegean isles
Wrought in his sleep.
Voices and laughter, maidens lithe and fair,
That flung the ball in eager play around.

He stared and called. They cried in fear and fled;
Save one firm-set, the princess of that land,
Nausicaa, wise daughter of the king.
To whom Odysseus told with easy craft
A merchant's tale of wreck and overthrow,
Beseeching aid which gracefully she gave,
And brought him so rejoicing to her home.
Now is he set at great Alcinous' side
Feasted and strong: and now the minstrel waits
To glad their hearts with tales of strife and worth.

Baritone solo

Grandly the minstrel sang of the heroes' might unavailing,
Sang of the gods that fought manlike on the meadows of Ilium:
Sang of Achilles dead, of the wondrous beauty of Helen,
Helen that walked as a star, till all men wept at the vision,
Crying their lives were nought, so-be she gladdened the city:
Sang of immortal names, great kings, of Hector and Ajax,
Sang till the tears coursed down like rain on the face of
Odysseus.

Chorus

On high Olympus sat the gods in feast.
Full pleased were they and their great hearts rejoiced
To see the wise Odysseus known and hailed.
Till at the nod of Zeus the thunder rolled
And filled the gleaming valleys far below.

ii. Circe

Baritone solo

The story of Odysseus, king of craft,
Told to Alcinous, Phaeacia's lord,
Of strange things done upon Aaea's isle,
When he set forth with that god-given herb,
The sacred moly, to encounter her,
Circe the wise, first daughter of the Sun,
Who held with strange enchantments 'neath her hand
The rash companions of his strife and toil.

Chorus

Through windless fields where sleep's red poppy grows
And hangs its head by fateful dreams downcast,
He went with stealth as some wise hunter goes,
Who knows not yet what waits him at the last.
And now there rose
Against the sky's deep amaranthine blue
The misty pillars of a house dream-planned:
And no wind blew
And no voice spake in that dream-haunted land.
Dim echoes of his footfalls on the stone
Of that vast court came whispering to his ear.
Amazed he stood, touched with that shrinking fear
The wanderer feels who is no more alone,
Uncertain of new meetings. All around
Came hopeless, hapless, weary-eyed and fond,
Four-footed things that gave no speech nor sound,
But gazed for ever to that house beyond
And agonised with mournful human eyes
To pass once more that lotus-carven door;
Beasts that were men before,
Held 'neath her charm,
Who waited there poised with uplifted arm;
A lovelier queen than ever tale hath told
With ivory skin and hair of sunset gold,
And whispering throat that softly broke to song.

Soprano solo

"O, wisest king, O, hero of the deep"
"From toil set free!"
"To these dim halls and palaces of sleep"
"I welcome thee."
"Here in this goblet lies all peace distilled:"
"The cup is filled,"
"Drink this to me."

"Here is an end of tempest and of tide;"
"No sisters three"
"Shall cut the thread that binds me to thy side,"
"My king to be."
"Here in this goblet youth immortal lies:"
"Look in these eyes,"
"Drink this to me."

"Lost hopes, lost loves-what boots it to pursue?"
"Ah, leave them be."
"Not Procne to her moon shall prove so true,"
"As I to thee."
"Here in this goblet lies love's passionate sum:"
"The hour is come!"
"Drink this to me!"

Chorus

Ah, maddening sweet her lips and voice and eyes
And drowsy mien.
But he most wise,
Clasping the sacred flower that none can charm
Drank deep and pledged the beauty of the queen,
Who stood imperious with uplifted arm
That pointed outward to that shrinking pack,
And bade him forth to join them. Safe from harm.
Once more he drank, and so gave answer back.

Baritone solo

"Shall fate rule all? Or art thou fate,"
"To map for me all years to come?"
"Must I slink four-foot out to wait"
"With these my comrades patient, dumb?"
"Shall life and death wait thy behest?"
"Perchance, fair queen, the gods know best."

"This hall is sweet with drowsy flowers,"
"Mark thou this flower, god-picked for me."
"Can there be powers beyond thy powers?"
"Could this poor herb prove match for thee?"
"Twere folly! Yet I drink and wait."
"Perchance, great queen, thou art not Fate."

Baritone solo

"By this bright sword here at my hand,"
"Save thou release my comrades all,"
"Thyself shall learn what gods command,"
"What fates bear rule! Make speed and call"
"Thy spells of change. Restore their state!"
"Fate rules thee, queen, and I am Fate!"

Chorus

As one who walks in dark strange ways of sleep,
With wide-strained eyes she moved a faltering pace;
Now glanced at that keen sword, then with one sweep
Flung forth her arm and with immortal grace
Of arching limb pronounced the fatal charm.
Forthwith there broke
A cry that split that immemorial calm
And left the silence one vast echoing peal.

And suddenly about him eager, real,
His comrades stood and pressed his hand to kiss.

Baritone solo

But heart aflame that they had suffered this,
In wrathful pity for their tears unstayed,
He turned again the menace of his blade
And paused an instant, eager for the stroke.

Chorus

And slowly, slowly, gathering like a cloud,
Fear fell about her till her face was bowed,
Her arms drooped lifeless, lowlier, lowlier yet
Her body drooped, until her lips were set
There 'gainst his foot, pale lips that pleaded "Life!"

iii. Cyclops

Chorus

Swift across the wine-dark sea,
Dancing thro' the tumbling spray,
Wind astern and sail so free,
Bent the ship her homeward way.
Singing gaily as they swing
Oars that dip and rise and foam,
Work the crew, while that wise king
Guides the ship and aches for home.

Land! land! land!
Ease the oar and drop the hand!
Free the sheet and let her run!
Comrades, comrades have we won
Home at last? Ah, master, say
Are we come to Ithaca?
Battle, tempest, famine past,
Have we won to home at last?
Vain their hope, but his great heart
Taught by her, the goddess wise,
Straight beguiled them with such art,
They forget their fretful cries.
Eager now each leaves his oar,
Slips into the tumbling main,
Fords the shallows, climbs ashore
Praising Zeus for land again.

Grim stands Etna belching flame,
Nought they heed, since all around
Feed the fat sheep, fearless, tame.
Gently, gently, make no sound!
Hey, we have her! – strike in deep!
Trojan sheep were ne'er so fat,
Food and wine and then good sleep.
Father Zeus! What sound is that?

Chorus

With a roar like drums
The Cyclops comes.
Burns like fire
The blood-red eye:
A pine tree's trunk
He shakes on high:
Roars once again,
Then dashes twain
To frightful death.
Vain to plead,
He will not heed:
Driving before
Both man and flock
To that vast cave,

Dank as the grave,
Where one huge rock
Seals fast the door.

Baritone solo

Ah, wine, that maketh glad the hearts of men,
What worth was thine to great Odysseus then.
Who proffered high the goatskin brimming full
To that vast throat that drank half at a pull,
Then laughed and bawled in ecstasy abroad,
'Twas nectar fit for gods and sunshine stored.
Ah, wine, that maketh glad the heart of man,
What tricks were thine? This giant straight began
To sing in tones that shook the mountain cave
This drunken stave.

Chorus

"Ah, fretful boy,"
"That would annoy"
"My heart, O imp of treason!"
"No more I'll heed"
"Thy wounds that bleed,"
"But sing and sing"
"This blessed thing,"
"This grape that scorneth reason."
"Fa, la, fiddle fiddle fa!"
"I'm tall as any little star:"
"I'm light as any thistledown:"
"More, more! And let me drink and drown!"

"Ah, treacherous maid,"
"That truant played"
"And dared to love another!"
"No more I'll care"
"That thou wert fair,"
"But sing and sing"
"This blessed thing,"
"This grape that can grief smother."
"Fa, la, fiddle fiddle fa!"
"I'm tall as any little star:"
"I'm light as any thistledown:"
"More, more! And let me drink and drown!"

"Ah, gentle sleep,"
"That man and sheep"
"And god and Cyclops borrow!"
"I'll drink in dreams"
"Of wine in streams,"
"And sing and sing"
"This blessed thing,"
"This grape that endeth sorrow."
"Fa, la, fiddle fiddle fa!"
"I'm tall as any little star:"
"I'm light as any thistledown:"
"More, more! And let me drink and drown!"

Baritone solo

And as those rumbling echoes die to nought,
This self-same sleep the drunken fool hath caught,
Who lifeless lies the rock-sealed door athwart.

Chorus

Stealthily, stealthily lift the staff!
Into the fire with it! Wait, it gleams.
Now we'll trouble the monster's dreams,
Into his eye with it! Press! Press on!
Leap for your lives, 'tis done, 'tis done!
Came a roar that split the sky,
Hurled the waves in headlong streams;

Great hands clasp the sightless eye,
Great limbs writhe, as waked from dreams,
Cyclops lifts, an instant stands
Threshing madly to and fro,
Then with eager clutching hands
Seeks and seeks the hidden foe.

Round! round! round!
Retch and roar and senseless sound;
Clumsy foot and groping hand
Search in vain, untouched they stand.
Safe they hide till he once more
Turns him back with baffled wit,
Sinking with a groan to sit
Huddled there beside the door.

Blest be dawn that kindled hope,
Hope that stirred the wise King's thought.
Straight he takes the monster's rope,
Pens the flock till each is caught,
Binds his fellows one by one
'Neath each wondering sheep and fast
Grips the great ram, till the sun
Brings back light to earth at last.

Now the patient flock grown wise
Softly bleats and would be gone.
Sullenly doth Cyclops rise,
Falters once, then groping on,
Finds the door and flings it wide,
Bids them on, yet ere they go,
Feels each back, the shepherd's pride,
Feels nor dreams what hangs below.

In freedom's thought
To madness wrought
Stands each one
With straining eye:
Their aching hands
They lift on high,
Greet with a shout
The world without,
And dance for joy.
Cyclops hears,
He pricks his ears,
Seeks all about,
Behind, before,
Through that vast cave,
Dank as the grave.
Then with a roar
Comes charging out.

Fast, fast as feet may run,
Urging, calling, speeding on,
Breathless, aching, stumbling, striving,
Praising, cursing, still contriving
Each to keep his place and pace.
Far behind like rolling thunder
Dashing rocks and trees asunder,
Comes the Cyclops roaring on!
Now the shallows ripple o'er us,
Now the blessed ship's before us,
Up and up and in and in!
Like a bird she takes the sea,
Fills the sheet, the wind comes free!

And Athene's owl goes hooting by
As the goddess laughs on Olympus high.

iv. *The Return*

Chorus

Ah, patient queen, in thy dark lonely bower,
What sounds assail thy solitude and grief?
The voices of thy suitors rise and beat
Like some wild flood that may not be denied
And cry thee forth. Rise- up, Penelope!
Take up the bow that shall decide thy fate
And with proud head go forth to meet thine hour.
Look long, fair queen, lift those tired eyes and see,
One rests apart from that vile clamorous throng.
What form is this clad in a beggar's robe
That stands a rock 'mid swirling tides of men,
That hurl reproach on that fond faithful head?
Look long, fair queen, this is fate's gift to thee.
Ah, lonely queen, and must fate try thee still?
Thou know'st him not, yet he with eager gaze
Devours once more that gladness of thy grace,
Drinks like an eagle from that heavenly spring,
Thy beauty's fount: then like an eagle turns
With flaming eyes, as wild impetuous hands
Seize fast the bow, whose fatal gift is death.

Now each in turn with instant force
Bends hands and thews to win this course.
Flushed eager face, arched straining back,
Strive how they will, the string hangs slack.
He mocks them each with taunts that burn,
Till spent and faint these weaklings turn,
Fling him the bow with curse and jest
And bid him do a beggar's best.
Upright he stands, with grace like flame
Athene decks his face and frame.
One instant poised with arms outflung,
One godlike thrust – the string is strung!
Loud sings the bow – the keen shaft falls,
There wakes a cry that fills the halls.
Shaft upon shaft, the great bow sings:
Shaft upon shaft unerring wings.
Shout upon shout, then clamours die.
A pleading moan – a shuddering sigh.
With noiseless wing Death passes by.

Duet

Man shall not toil for ever, nor be thrust
'Mid endless dangers, since the gods are just.
Man shall not wait for ever to endure
Unjust oppression, since the fates are sure.
O, goddess mighty, faithful and all-wise,
Our lives and fate upon thy blessing wait,
Let our new bliss be pleasant in thine eyes.
O, goddess, hail! O, great Athene, hail!
Thy word is sure, thy wisdom shall not fail.

Love, thou hast conquered!
Time could not vanquish thee,
Grief could not master thee,
Patient, immutable.
Love thou hast conquered!
Seas could not bury thee,
Charms could not baffle thee,
Glorious, impregnable!
Love, thou hast conquered!
Now from your happiness
Turn to make recompense,
Crying Athene's praise,
All wise and bountiful.
She that hath succoured you,
Goddess immortal!

Sir George Dyson (1883-1964)
Four Songs for Sailors
for chorus, strings, brass and timpani (1948)

BBC Concert Orchestra
London Oriana Choir
conducted by David Drummond

i. To the Thames

Chorus

O could I flow like thee, and make thy stream
My great example, as is my theme!
Though deep, yet clear, though gentle, yet not dull,
Strong without rage, without o'erflowing full.

Sir John Denham (1615-69)
(from 'Cooper's Hill')

ii. Where Lies the Land?

Where lies the land to which the ship would go?
Far, far ahead, is all her seamen know.
And where the land she travels from? Away,
Far, far behind, is all that they can say.

On sunny noons upon the deck's smooth face,
Linked arm in arm, how pleasant here to pace;
Or, o'er the stern reclining, watch below
The foaming wake far widening as we go.

On stormy nights when wild north-westerns rave
How proud a thing to fight with wind and wave!
The dripping sailor on the reeling mast
Exults to bear, and scorns to wish it past.

Where lies the land to which the ship would go?
Far, far ahead, is all her seamen know.
And where the land she travels from? Away,
Far, far behind, is all that they can say.

Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-61)

iii. Sea Music

The night is calm and cloudless
And still as can be,
And the stars come forth to listen
To the music of the sea.

They gather and gather and gather
Until they crowd the sky,
And listen in breathless silence
To the solemn litany.

It begins in rocky caverns
As a voice that chants alone,
To the pedals of the organ
In monotonous undertone,

And anon from shelving beaches,
And shallow seas beyond,
In snow-white robes uprising
The ghostly choirs respond.

And sadly and unceasing
The mournful voice sings on.
And the snow-white choirs still answer,
Christe eleison.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82)
(from 'Christus, a mystery')

iv. A Wet Sheet and a Flowing Sea

A wet sheet and a flowing sea,
And a wind that follows fast,
And fills the white and rustling sail,
And bends the gallant mast;
And bends the gallant mast, my boys,
Which, like the eagle free,
Away the good ship flies, and leaves
Old England on the lee.

Oh, for a soft and gentle wind!
I heard a fair one cry;
But give to me the snoring breeze,
And white waves heaving high;
And white waves heaving high, my boys,
The good ship tight and free –
The world of waters is our home,
And merry men are we.

There's tempest in yon hornèd moon,
And lightning in yon cloud;
And hark the music, mariners!
The wind is piping loud;
The wind is piping loud, my boys,
The lightning flashing free,
While the hollow oak our palace is,
Our heritage the sea.

Allan Cunningham (1784-1842)