

# CHECKMATE

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# Checkmate

## (Complete Ballet)

# Mêlée Fantasque

# Royal Scottish National Orchestra

# David Lloyd-Jones

## Arthur Bliss (1891-1975)

### Mêlée Fantastique • Checkmate: Ballet in One Scene with a Prologue

Arthur Bliss, who was half-American, studied at Cambridge and the Royal College of Music. During the First World War he served with distinction, and in the post-war years his career was launched with a series of bold ensemble works such as *Rout* (1920). These gained him the reputation as an avant-garde experimentalist, as did his first major orchestral work *A Colour Symphony* (1921-2). His musical language reached its maturity in the late 1920s as heard in the *Oboe Quintet* (1927) and *Pastoral* (1928). In the 1930s his memories of war inspired the profound choral symphony *Morning Heroes* (1930), whilst his *Music for Strings* (1935) demonstrated his mastery of musical structures.

A characteristic of Bliss's career was his partnerships with major artists of other genres, beginning, in 1934-5, with the score for Alexander Korda's film *Things to Come*, based on H.G. Wells's novel. Ballet was an important medium for him and he collaborated with Ninette de Valois on *Checkmate* (1937) and with Robert Helpmann on *Miracle in the Gorbals* (1944) and *Adam Zero* (1946). Other collaborators included J.B. Priestley, who wrote the libretto for the opera *The Olympians* (1948-9).

Among orchestral works are concertos for piano (1939), violin (1955) and cello (1970), as well as *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow* (1955) and *Metamorphic Variations* (1972). His formidable organisational talents were brought into play as director of music at the BBC during the Second World War, and from 1953 as Master of the Queen's Music. He was knighted in 1950, and his autobiography *As I Remember* is a fascinating portrait of his life and times.

In the years immediately before and after the First World War, Bliss's enthusiasm for ballet was fostered

by the brilliance of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes on their visits to London. In particular Stravinsky's great scores made a huge impression, and his influence on Bliss in the post-war years was significant, as is apparent in *Mêlée Fantastique*. Composed in 1921, it was Bliss's first orchestral work to be performed in public when Henry Wood invited the composer to conduct it in his Promenade Concerts that year. It was dedicated to the memory of the artist and theatre designer Claude Lovat Fraser, with whom Bliss had collaborated on productions of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *The Tempest*. As he acknowledged in his programme note, Bliss considered *Mêlée Fantastique* his first ballet score; in it he aimed 'to convey the rhythmic verve and Bakst-like colour of Lovat Fraser's paintings'. These were 'evoked in colourful episodes', which Bliss contrasted with 'elegiac passages which hint at the loss of this gifted friend'. Bliss had a great affection for this work and twice revised it.

*Checkmate* was inspired by another of Bliss's enthusiasms, chess, and as he explained in an article *Death on Squares*, written in 1938, the seeds for the ballet were sown at a dinner party when the conversation turned on subjects suitable for ballet. Games were mentioned, and 'the idea of the pitiless queen in chess leapt from someone's brain'. Nothing came of the concept at the time, but when Bliss was asked to write a work for the Vic-Wells Ballet he returned to the idea. Bliss wrote his own scenario, but was greatly helped by the theatre director W. Bridges Adams. *Checkmate* was composed in 1936-7, with choreography by Ninette de Valois and designs by E. McKnight Kauffer. De Valois' choreography combined classical steps, English traditional dance like Morris, as

well as the sinister goose-steps of the Nazis which inevitably linked the ballet's subject to the mood of the times when war clouds were gathering.

The première on 15th June 1937 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris was a glittering occasion, danced by a cast with now legendary names, including Frederick Ashton (Death), Robert Helpmann (Red King), Harold Turner (Red Knight), June Brae (Black Queen), Pamela May (Red Queen) and Margot Fonteyn leading the Black Pawns. Constant Lambert conducted the Orchestre des Concerts Lamoureux. The British première took place on 5th October the same year at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London, and the combined talents brought about a masterpiece of English ballet which remains in the repertoire today.

In the description of the action that follows the quotations are taken from both Bliss's scenario and the stage directions. The music of the *Prologue* is sombre, characterized by a brooding viola melody. As the curtain rises two players, one in gold armour, the other in black, sit motionless with a chess-board between them. The gold player removes his visor; he is Love: the black player strips off his gauntlet revealing the skeletal arm of Death. Choosing red and black respectively, they will fight for the lives of their subjects. The curtain slowly falls.

At the beginning of the *Dance of the Red Pawns*, the stage is revealed as a chess-board on which the red pieces are assembling. The pawns, 'light-hearted pages' dance to a carefree woodwind theme, the music of novices which captures their youthful ardour. By the end of the dance they are drawn up in a stylistic chess formation. Two Red Knights, 'fierce and powerful fighters', bound onto the board to an accented string theme which is courageous and masculine as they start the *Dance of the Four Knights*. The two Black Knights follow on a 'reconnoitring visit of chivalry'. To leaping

rhythms, they salute and challenge each other to displays of prowess in which the first Red Knight surpasses them all. As the dance finishes, the Black Knights fall on their knees at the approach of their Queen; the music is ominous, pregnant with danger; *she* is the 'most dangerous piece on the board.'

The *Entry of the Black Queen* is epitomized by a sensuous clarinet melody offset by harp arpeggios, indicative of both her sexual allure and her deadly, cold-hearted nature. She mesmerises the red pieces, especially the Red Knight and to a melting solo violin phrase flings him a rose; he is ensnared by her guile. He is exultant in having, supposedly, gained her love and in *The Red Knight's Mazurka* responds with an athletic, elated solo in which his main theme is contrasted by a tender idea on woodwind. Towards the end the music turns sinister, as if presaging his doom.

The *Ceremony of the Red Bishops* is evoked by a chiming bell and a chant-like fragment on the strings. The pawns slowly dip the banners of their knights 'to give the stage the appearance of a chapel', but the blessing is interrupted by the *Entry of the Red Castles* who, with their brutish strides to clashing cymbals, suggest that 'force is the final arbiter'. For this section Bliss re-used music from the sequence '*The Building of the New World*' from the film *Things to Come*, as he felt that music portraying robotic machinery equally characterized the castles which he described as 'inhuman and menacing monsters'. Brilliant 'Pomp and Ceremony' fanfares ring out as the Red King and Queen approach. The *Entry of the Red King and Queen* is marked by a regal horn solo with florid decoration as the old and feeble Red King, the weakest piece on the board, is borne in on a palanquin. On the last chord of this movement the pawns adopt a fighting position: 'a complete set of red pieces in their chess positions is thus shown to the audience.'

With *The Attack* the ‘Game begins’ as brass and wind play a forceful theme and the stage becomes ‘alive with the intricate manœuvres of the chess battle’. The corps de ballet alternate with the Black Queen’s solos, the latter’s sallies accompanied by castanets. As the music slows, massive dissonant chords indicate that ‘a clear opening to the Red King is laid bare; the Black Queen’s menacing manœuvre results in ‘the CHECK! of the King’ to two jabbing chords. He summons his Bishops to assist him; they intercede to their chant, but are imperiously dismissed by the ruthless Queen. The Red King’s consort implores mercy in a pleading oboe solo, but the two Black Knights carry her forcibly away.

In *The Duel* between the Red Knight and the Black Queen, Bliss interweaves fragments of themes from previous sections. Their combat becomes a battle of wills until the Knight has the Queen at his mercy. Torn between duty and infatuation, the Red Knight hesitates to strike as the Prologue melody resounds through the orchestra, building to thudding chords as he drops his sword. The Queen’s alluring theme is recalled; the Knight turns his back as he takes the rose from his breast to the music from the tender section of his Mazurka, As the music veers to the sinister, she stabs

him to a distorted version of his theme. The giant figures of the two players appear; Death throws his black gauntlet on the corpse which, to doleful cor anglais and flute solos, is borne off in a funeral cortège.

In a steely, cold-blooded tango *The Black Queen Dances*, taunting the terrified Red monarch. Her music twists and turns as, to a solo violin passage, she seemingly plays with her victim, finally leaving the stage ‘with a gesture of savage triumph’. At the beginning of the *Finale* the King looks for means of flight, the music alternating between slow, nervous passages and fast violent outbursts, as his means of escape are blocked. To relentless, ferocious, music the final onslaught begins with the black forces hounding their quarry. Surrounded by his enemies, the King is forced back to his throne, but recalling his youthful, heroic self he shows a brief moment of defiance appearing ‘majestic as a lion at bay’ to thundering percussion. For an instant the black pieces waver. But behind him stands the Black Queen, spear aloft; she plunges it into his back as the music vividly portrays the death blows. ‘It is Checkmate’.

**Andrew Burn**

## Royal Scottish National Orchestra

Formed in 1891 as the Scottish Orchestra, in 1951 the ensemble, now full-time, took the name of the Scottish National Orchestra, later assuming the title Royal, a recognition of its importance in the musical life of Scotland. Distinguished conductors who have worked with the orchestra include Sir John Barbirolli, Karl Rankl, Hans Swarowsky, Walter Susskind, Sir Alexander Gibson, the first Scottish-born Principal Conductor, Bryden Thomson and Neeme Järvi. Walter Weller, now Conductor Emeritus, served as Music Director and Principal Conductor from 1992 to 1997, when he was succeeded by Alexander Lazarev. He joins Walter Weller as a Conductor Emeritus on the appointment of Stéphane Denève as Music Director from September 2005. Other members of the RSNO Artistic Team include the Principal Guest Conductor Garry Walker and Associate Conductor James Lowe. The orchestra made an important contribution to the authoritative Naxos series of Bruckner *Symphonies* (8.501101) under the late Georg Tintner, and under the former Principal Guest Conductor Marin Alsop recorded a complete cycle of the orchestral works of Samuel Barber. There have also been significant additions to the stock of recordings of film music, with award-winning releases in London and in Germany. A busy schedule in Scotland brings regular seasons in its home-town of Glasgow, annual appearances at the Edinburgh Festival and regular performances in the BBC Promenade Concerts in London. In addition to concerts in England, the orchestra has travelled to other countries, with tours of North America and Japan, and throughout Europe. In 2002 the orchestra was given a Classic FM 'Red F' award for its outstanding contribution to classical music, through recording, performance, education and outreach work. The RSNO was also nominated four times in the 47th annual Grammy Awards in 2005.

## David Lloyd-Jones

David Lloyd-Jones began his professional career in 1959 on the music staff of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and soon became much in demand as a freelance conductor for orchestral and choral concerts, opera, BBC broadcasts and TV studio opera productions. He has appeared at the Royal Opera House (*Boris Godunov* with both Christoff and Ghaiurov), Welsh National Opera, Scottish Opera and the Wexford, Cheltenham, Edinburgh and Leeds Festivals, and with the major British orchestras. In 1972 he was appointed Assistant Music Director at English National Opera, and during his time there conducted an extensive repertory which included, in addition to all the standard operas, *Die Meistersinger*, *Katya Kabanova*, and the British stage première of Prokofiev's *War and Peace*. In 1978, at the invitation of the Arts Council of Great Britain, he founded a new full-time opera company, Opera North, with its own orchestra, the English Northern Philharmonia, of which he became Artistic Director and Principal Conductor. During his twelve seasons with the company he conducted fifty different new productions, including *The Trojans*, *Prince Igor*, *The Midsummer Marriage* (Tippett), and the British stage première of Strauss's *Daphne*. He also conducted numerous orchestral concerts, including festival appearances in France and Germany. He has made many successful recordings of British and Russian music, and has an extensive career in the concert-hall and opera-house that takes him to leading musical centres throughout Central Europe, Scandinavia, Russia, Israel, Australia, Japan, Canada and the Americas. His highly acclaimed cycle of Bax's symphonies and tone poems for Naxos (*Gramophone Award*) was completed in the autumn of 2003.

Sir Arthur Bliss, Master of the Queen's Music from 1953, was one of the leading British composers of his generation. The sparkling *Mêlée Fantastique* (1921), which the composer considered to be his first ballet score, shows the influence of Stravinsky and Dyagilev's Ballets Russes. *Checkmate* (1937), a collaboration with the great choreographer, Ninette de Valois, is a masterpiece of English ballet, full of striking ideas and colourful effects. This disc offers a rare opportunity to hear the complete ballet, which remains in the repertoire to this day.

Arthur  
**BLISS**  
(1891-1975)

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|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| <b>1</b>  | <b>Mêlée Fantastique</b>                                             | <b>12:00</b> |
|           | <b>Checkmate: Ballet in One Scene with a Prologue</b>                | <b>53:03</b> |
| <b>2</b>  | Prologue – The Players: Moderato maestoso                            | 5:46         |
| <b>3</b>  | Dance of the Red Pawns: Allegro spirito scherzando                   | 2:25         |
| <b>4</b>  | Dance of the Four Knights: Allegro moderato sempre robustamente      | 3:49         |
| <b>5</b>  | Entry of the Black Queen: L'istesso tempo                            | 5:31         |
| <b>6</b>  | The Red Knight's Mazurka: Moderato gioiosamente                      | 3:38         |
| <b>7</b>  | Ceremony of the Red Bishops: Largamente (misticamente)               | 2:12         |
| <b>8</b>  | Entry of the Red Castles: Allegro molto deciso                       | 2:24         |
| <b>9</b>  | Entry of the Red King and Queen: Grave                               | 1:46         |
| <b>10</b> | The Attack: Allegro impetuoso e brillante                            | 7:03         |
| <b>11</b> | The Duel: Maestoso moderato e molto appassionato                     | 8:26         |
| <b>12</b> | The Black Queen Dances: Allegretto dispettoso                        | 3:42         |
| <b>13</b> | Finale – Checkmate: Andante poco sostenuto – Allegro vivace e feroce | 6:20         |

**Royal Scottish National Orchestra • David Lloyd-Jones**

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Playing Time  
65:03



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