

Ernest Chausson: *Le Roi Arthur* [King Arthur], lyric drama in three acts and six scenes

The origins of Ernest Chausson's only completed opera, *Le Roi Arthur* (premiered in 1903), extend over the decade-long period from early 1886 through the end of 1895. Throughout this time, Chausson reworked his score and libretto in parallel, often significantly, as may be gleaned from numerous sketch materials preserved at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (Austin, Texas), and in the private archives of the Chausson family (Paris).

Chausson's decision to author his own libretto came on the heels of the failure of a prior, unfinished stage work, *Hélène* (1883-1886), with a libretto by Leconte de Lisle. In a letter to Paul Poujaud in 1884, Chausson described the lesson he learned from the difficulties of that project, a lesson he put into practice in *Le Roi Arthur*: "My dear friend, never set music to words that were not written by you specifically for that purpose" (Chausson, *Écrits inédits*, p. 173). The composer's decision to be his own librettist recalls not only [Hector Berlioz](#) (who wrote most of his own librettos), but also the Wagnerian model, which dominates (directly and indirectly) the intertextual network in which *Le Roi Arthur* may be situated.

The plot of the opera (the forbidden love between King Arthur's wife, Queen Guinevere, and the faithful knight, Lancelot) is drawn from Arthurian legends, a corpus which is analogous to the Nordic myths that inspired Wagner's own stage works. Moreover, the aspects of the storyline selected by Chausson strongly evoke the dramatic arc of *Tristan and Isolde*. Chausson's difficulty in escaping Wagner's influence was one of the reasons that the genesis of *Le Roi Arthur* was so protracted. This complex process is abundantly documented in Chausson's correspondence, which contains, in addition to commentary on his writing and compositional work, regular extracts of his libretto sent to composer friends like Poujaud or Henri Duparc. Duparc responded, in early 1888, with a long letter that ultimately had a major impact on the final version of Chausson's libretto (largely reproduced in Benoit-Otis 2012, p. 200-221). On the basis of Duparc's recommendations, Chausson profoundly reworked his libretto in order to limit as much as possible any resemblance to *Tristan*: by transforming the love story between Guinevere and Lancelot (who became more and more fragile through these changes, and hardly recalls Tristan by the final version), he increased the importance given to Arthur, who is ultimately presented as a sort of secular Christ figure, symbolising justice, peace, and mercy, with no Wagnerian equivalent.

Despite these important modifications, the libretto to *Le Roi Arthur* preserves various dramatic similarities not only to *Tristan and Isolde* (which remains a model for the love duet in Act I, scene 2), but also to various French operas in the Wagnerian mold, such as [Emmanuel Chabrier's](#) *Gwendoline* (1886) (libretto by

Catulle Mendès), or [Vincent d'Indy's](#) *Fervaal* (1897) (libretto by d'Indy himself). The work also recalls the love duo from [Charles Gounod's](#) *Roméo et Juliette* (libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré), and the conflict between love and duty staged in Berlioz's *Les Troyens*.

Drawing inspiration from sources both French and Wagnerian, the *Roi Arthur* libretto testifies to the extreme care Chausson brought to his writing and revision. The text, which consists of strict verses alternating with a musically rhythmic prose, contains passages of great profundity—especially as sung by Arthur, who remains the prevailing character of the opera.

Marie-Hélène BENOIT-OTIS

24/09/2021

Trans. Peter Asimov

Further reading

Benoit-Otis, Marie-Hélène, *Ernest Chausson, Le Roi Arthur et l'opéra wagnérien en France*, Francfort, Peter Lang, 2012.

Benoit-Otis, Marie-Hélène, « Un long parcours de “dévagnérisation” : Ernest Chausson et le livret du *Roi Arthur* », dans Michela Niccolai et Giuseppe Montemagno (éd.), *Beyond the Stage: Musical Theatre and Performing Arts Between Fin de siècle and the Années folles*, Bologne, Ut Orpheus, 2017, p. 171-194.

To quote this article: Marie-Hélène Benoit-Otis, "Ernest Chausson: Le Roi Arthur [King Arthur], lyric drama in three acts and six scenes", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 08/09/2022, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/paratext/55761>.