A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

MUSIC BY
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LIBRETTO BY
Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears after William Shakespeare
PREMIERED
June 11, 1960 at the Aldeburgh Festival, England

SYNOPSIS

Act I:
At twilight, Fairies prepare to deck the Athenian woods with dew. The nimble Puck announces their King Oberon and Queen Tytania, who have strained the bonds of Nature herself with a custody battle over a little changeling pageboy whose mother served the Queen. Tytania refuses to share the King's bed until he should return the child.

Oberon sends Puck to fetch the juice of a rare flower, which, when dropped upon Tytania's eyes, will make her fall in love with the first creature she sees. Thus he'll be revenged, holding her affections captive until she deliver up the pageboy.

Hermia and Lysander flee to the woods from her father's order that she marry Demetrius. Soon after comes Demetrius fleeing Helena's pursuit. Oberon enters and overhears, and bids Puck drop the magic flower-juice on Demetrius' eyes to make him reciprocate Helena's affection, restoring the symmetry of the pair of pairs, while he himself will take the rest for Tytania.

Six craftsmen meet to rehearse a play which they hope to perform for the wedding of Duke Theseus of Athens to Queen Hippolyta of the Amazons. After some discussion, Peter Quince, the leader, casts Nick Bottom as the lover Pyramus and Francis Flute as his lady Thisbe.

Puck, finding Lysander and Hermia asleep, mistakes Lysander for Demetrius and sprinkles the juice over his eyes. Demetrius arrives with Helena at his heels; he abandons her near the sleeping pair. Helena rouses Lysander, who is instantly smitten. He proclaims his love and she, believing he mocks her, runs off in a rage. He follows, leaving Hermia to awaken alone from a terrible dream.

The Fairies sing their Queen to sleep, and Oberon drops the magic juice upon her eyes.

Act II:

The craftsmen, gathered in the woods for rehearsal, consider some revisions to their script. Puck overhears and decides to have some fun by turning Bottom's head into that of an ass. The transformation puts Bottom's terrified colleagues to flight. Left alone, he sings to cheer himself

… and Tytania, waking to his strains, is smitten on the spot. Her fairies fly to attend him, and he falls asleep in her arms.

Oberon and Puck enter, comparing notes. Seeing Hermia and Demetrius stagger in — she accusing him of having killed Lysander — they realize Puck has enchanted the wrong Athenian. Demetrius stops to rest, and Oberon bestows an antidote on him whilst Puck flies to find the others.

No sooner does Helena enter with Lysander on her heels than Demetrius awakes, ready to adore her. Smothered by the praises of both men, who roundly reject the arriving Hermia, Helena reaches the peak of exasperation, accusing Hermia of goading the fellows to such a cruel joke. The quartet quarrels furiously: and Oberon, equally furious with Puck, orders him to administer the antidote to Lysander. Puck leads the lovers through the woods by imitating their voices, until they all fall into a dazed sleep; then sweetly applies the solution.

Act III:

The Fairy Queen awakens, shocked to find an ass in her bed. Oberon, who is ready to restore the page to his wife, orders Puck to restore Bottom to full humanity. The King and Queen dance with the fairies and plan to bless the wedding of Duke Theseus the following night.

The four lovers awaken to a beyond-hoped-for proper pairing. The five craftsmen, bereft of Bottom, despair of performing for the Duke's nuptials, until Bottom appears, sane and whole, with the beyond-hoped-for news that they'll go on stage after all.

Duke Theseus and Queen Hippolyta prepare for their wedding and receive the quartet of lovers at the palace. The Play of Pyramus and Thisby is performed — as is a triple wedding.

At the last stroke of "the iron tongue of midnight,"
the rustics bow and go their way,
while dewy Fairies sweetly stray
throughout the palace; and those just wed
make their respective ways to bed.

(Courtesy of The Santa Fe Opera)