

"Weir is a creature of the theatre and it shows"

FINANCIAL TIMES

# JUDITH WEIR AT 70

OPERAS

WEIR  
70  
IN 2024



**Wise Music** *Classical*

# CONTENTS

## OPERA

Blond Eckbert	7
Miss Fortune	9
A Night at the Chinese Opera	10
The Vanishing Bridegroom	13

## CHAMBER OPERA

Armida	4
Blond Eckbert (Pocket Version)	7
Scipio's Dream	10
The Vanishing Bridegroom (Chamber Version)	13

## OPERA FOR YOUNG PERFORMERS

The Black Spider	5
The Black Spider (Hamburg version)	5

## MUSIC DRAMA

King Harald's Saga	8
The Consolations of Scholarship	9



# JUDITH WEIR

Celebrating her 70th birthday in 2024, Judith Weir is a composer whose music reaches out to the listener with a distinctive and persuasive voice. Her operas, composed over the course of more than 30 years, lie at the heart of her output. They draw on folk tales, myth and legend from diverse cultures across the ages, reshaped with the combination of wit and ingenuity that has become Weir's hallmark.



© Benjamin Ealovega

## BIOGRAPHY

Judith Weir was born into a Scottish family in 1954, but grew up near London. She was an oboe player, performing with the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, and studied composition with John Tavener during her schooldays. She went on to Cambridge University, where her composition teacher was Robin Holloway; and in 1975 attended summer school at Tanglewood, where she worked with Gunther Schuller. After this she spent several years working in schools and adult education in rural southern England; followed by a period based in Scotland, teaching at Glasgow University and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

During this time she began to write a series of operas (including *King Harald's Saga*, *The Black Spider*, *A Night at the Chinese Opera*, *The Vanishing Bridegroom* and *Blond Eckbert*) which have subsequently received many performances in the UK, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium and the USA. The most recent opera is *Miss Fortune*, premiered at Bregenz in 2011, and then staged at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden in 2012. In collaboration with director Margaret Williams, Weir has created several opera films, including *Scipio's Dream* and *Armida*.

As resident composer with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in the 1990s, she wrote several works for orchestra and chorus (including *Forest*, *Storm* and *We are Shadows*) which were premiered by the orchestra's then Music Director, Simon Rattle. She has been commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra (*Music Untangled* and *Natural History*) the Minnesota Orchestra (*The Welcome Arrival of Rain*) and the London Sinfonietta (*Tiger under*

*the Table*); and has written concert works for some notable singers, including Jane Manning, Jessye Norman, Dawn Upshaw, Alice Coote, Ailish Tynan and Ruby Hughes. She has composed Concertos for Piano (William Howard) and Oboe (Celia Craig).

In recent years, Judith Weir has considerably expanded her choral catalogue, with regular performance by choirs worldwide of music such as her Christmas carol *Illuminare, Jerusalem* written for Stephen Cleobury and the choir of King's College Cambridge. As associate composer with the BBC Singers (2015-19) she completed two oratorios; *In the Land of Uz*, about the prophet Job; and *blue hills beyond blue hills*, to Zen-influenced verse by the Scottish poet Alan Spence.

Now based in London, she has had a long association with Spitalfields Music Festival; and has taught as a visiting professor at Princeton, Harvard and Cardiff universities. Honours for her work include the Critics' Circle, South Bank Show, Ivor Novello and Elise L Stoeger awards, a CBE and The Queen's Medal for Music.

In July 2014 Judith Weir was appointed to the 395-year old royal post of Master of the Queen's Music, in succession to Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. Amongst her priorities in this role are the support of school music teachers, of amateur orchestras and choirs, and of rural festivals. In this role she has written music for national and royal occasions, including the Queen's 90th birthday celebrations and the UK's official commemoration of the 1918 Armistice. She has also created new music for many community groups and schools, including Burntwood School Wandsworth, Aberdeen Art Gallery, St Mary's Church Dover and Greenacre School, Barnsley.

Judith Weir's music has been widely recorded, particularly on the NMC and Delphian labels; and is published by Chester Music and Novello & Co.





© Margaret Williams

## Armida



**(2005) 50 MINS**

*Commissioned by Channel Four Television Corporation (Channel Four)*

**Libretto (English) by the composer**

**2 Sopranos, 2 Tenors, Baritone, 2 Basses**

**0.0.1(bcl).ssx.0/0010/perc/pf/str(11021)**

In this re-telling of a story that has fascinated opera composers since the earliest days of the artform, the action takes place in an unnamed city under occupation. Originally conceived for television and filmed on location in Morocco in a production directed by Margaret Williams, the piece can also be staged as a chamber opera.

High-powered newsreader and journalist Armida is becoming increasingly exhausted with her job. Successful army man Rinaldo is also having doubts about his vocation. Can both of them find a sense of fulfilment in the middle of a warzone?

*“Weir has taken Tasso’s peace-loving soldier-hero Rinaldo and transplanted him to a country that looks like Iraq but is never named as such. Armida the enchantress that Rinaldo falls in love with becomes a war reporter, her sidekick a weather-girl. ...Weir’s music is as ever confident, soulful and distinctive...”*

*Independent on Sunday*

# THE BLACK SPIDER

Two stories with chilling parallels are told side-by-side in this opera for young performers, described by the composer as “somewhere between a video nasty and an Ealing comedy” in tone. The scoring of the vocal and instrumental parts is flexible, making the opera practical for a wide range of settings and abilities.

The three acts of *The Black Spider* are framed by five spoken interludes. The interludes are set in the present day and are very closely based on news reports from Poland about recent excavations of a tomb in Krakow and the strange events that followed. The three (sung) acts of the opera are very loosely based on the Swiss-German novella *Die Schwarze Spinne* (1842) by Jeremias Gotthelf.

## The Black Spider



**(1984) 60 MINS**

Commissioned by Kent Opera with funds from the South East Arts Association

**Libretto (English) by the composer, also available in German translation**

**2 main singing roles**

**Chorus (with many small solo parts)**

**[3cl\*]/[2tpt\*]/3perc/[gtr]/pf[=kbd]**

\*or suitable wind/string replacements

## Das Geheimnis der schwarzen Spinne The Black Spider – Hamburg version



**(2009) 75 MINS**

**Libretto (German) by the composer, translated by Benjamin Gordon**

**3 main singing roles**

**SATB (11 smaller singing roles)**

**0020/0200/2perc/hp/str(44331)**

“...a horror story from top to bottom, a creepy crawly ghastly thing that makes kids squirm in their seats even as they pay rapt attention...”

*St Louis Post*



"This is one of the most ravishing operatic scores written in the past 15 years, inspired by the romanticism not only of Tieck, but also of Schumann and Brahms, although it sounds like neither and could only have been written in the latter half of the 20th century."

*The Sunday Times*





# BLOND ECKBERT

A dark tale based on the novella by the German Romantic Ludwig Tieck.

Eckbert and his wife Berthe live in seclusion in the Harz Mountains. One stormy night, Eckbert's friend Walther arrives and, to while away the time, Berthe tells him her life story. Walther mysteriously knows a great deal about Berthe's early life and Eckbert's suspicions grow, eventually leading him to murder Walther during a hunting expedition. Consumed by terror and suspicion, Eckbert retreats into seclusion and revisits the fairy-tale scenes of Berthe's childhood, accompanied by a magical singing bird. He encounters the old woman who raised Berthe, and at last learns the terrible truth about Walther, Berthe, and himself.

## Blond Eckbert



**(1993) 75 MINS**

*Commissioned by English National Opera with funds provided by the Geoffrey C. Hughes Charitable Trust*

**Libretto (English) by the composer**

**Soprano, Mezzo soprano, Tenor, Baritone**

**SATB chorus**

**2(pic).2(ca).2(bcl).2(cbn)/4.3.2+btbn.0/timp.perc/hp/str**

"...an accessible modern classic..."

*Independent on Sunday*

## Blond Eckbert

### Pocket Version



**(2006) 60 MINS**

*Commissioned by The Opera Group and Sequitur*

**Libretto (English) by the composer, also available in German translation by Alexander Gruber and Frank Harders-Wuthenow**

**Soprano, Mezzo soprano, Tenor, Baritone**

**0.1.2(bcl).0/2000/hp/2vn.2vc**

"...the piece sparkles with a magical, luminous charm."

*The Guardian*

for Jane Manning (1979)

## KING HARALD'S SAGA

JUDITH WEIR

**Act 1**

**Spoken:\***  
King Harald's Saga, act one. It is the year 1066. In the royal palace at Oslo, King Harald of Norway recounts his previous triumphs on the field of battle. To a fanfare of trumpets, Earl Tostig arrives from England. Tostig is a traitor. He persuades King Harald to invade England.

Fervent, freely.  $\text{♩} = 69$

**Harald**  
*f sempre*

I, Ha—rald by the grace of al-might-y God, King  
of all the north—em lands, might—iest wa—rior that e-ver donned a coat of mail and

\* To be spoken normally, at moderate pace and with an even delivery. [as on a radio announcement]

© Copyright 1982 Novello & Company Limited All Rights Reserved

# King Harald's Saga



**(1979) 10 MINS**

Commissioned by Jane Manning with funds from the Arts Council of Great Britain

**Libretto (English) by the composer**

**Soprano solo**

No survey of Judith Weir's operas would be truly complete without this masterfully compressed miniature epic telling the story of the lesser-known invasion of England in 1066. The solo soprano takes on eight different roles – not to mention the part of the Norwegian army – depicting the invasion, led by Norwegian King Harald 'Hardradi', which ended in defeat at the battle of Stamford Bridge, 19 days before the successful Norman invasion at the Battle of Hastings. The story is told in three acts and at breakneck speed, with much of the detail taken from a 13th century account of the invasion found in the Icelandic saga *Heimskringla*.

“King Harald's Saga... embodies the qualities that still define Weir's musical thinking: her concern to tell stories, her ability to distil musical and dramatic ideas to their essences, and her creation of an idiom that's full of expressive subtlety but is never anything less than richly communicative.”

*The Guardian*

# The Consolations of Scholarship



**(1985) 25 MINS**

*Commissioned by Musicon of Durham University, with funds from the Arts Council of Great Britain*

**Libretto (English) by the composer**

**Soprano solo**

**1(afl,pic)111/1000/perc/pf/str(10010)**

This music drama is presented in the style of a Chinese Yüan drama from the 13th/14th century. Chao Tun, a virtuous government official, is implicated in a plot against the Emperor by the ambitious and ruthless General K'an. Chao is sent a forged imperial edict to take his own life. Before doing so he tells his wife to leave the city with their newly-born son. The son is brought up by a hermit and 20 years later goes to the capital to read the neglected philosophical classics. Stumbling across a text which reveals the truth about his father's death, he sets out to exact his revenge.

# Miss Fortune



**(2011) 90 MINS**

*Commissioned by the Bregenz Festival and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden*

**Libretto (English) by the composer**

**Soprano, 2 Mezzo Sopranos, Countertenor, Tenor, Baritone, Bass Baritone**

**SATB chorus**

**2(pic).1.3(bcl).1+cbn/3130/3perc/pf/str**

A contemporary re-telling of a Sicilian folk story. Tina's wealthy family lose all their possessions overnight and she is thrown into a life of poverty. When her life's course turns from bad to worse, she makes a date with Fate. Her fortunes mysteriously change, and after several fortuitous happenings, she regains wealth, and, possibly, a husband.

The opera explores what it means to be rich or poor; the mysteries of everyday life; and the effects of chance, luck and accident on human existence.

*"Weir is a splendidly economical composer... (her score) unfolds with mystery and many a glint of unusual colour, felicitous twists of harmony, half-allusions that she calmly makes her own."*

*The Sunday Times*

# A Night at the Chinese Opera



**(1987) 110 MINS**

*Commissioned by the BBC for premiere by Kent Opera*

**Libretto (English) by the composer**

**Soprano, 2 Mezzo sopranos, Countertenor, 3 Tenors, 2 Baritones, Bass, Boy (non-speaking role)**

**2(2pic).2.2.2/4100/2perc/pf/str**

13th century China in the era of Kublai Khan and Marco Polo is the setting for this three-act opera. At the heart of the drama is a re-telling of the Yuan dynasty play *The Chao Family Orphan* by Chi Chun-hsiang.

Chao Sun, explorer and mapmaker, leaves his city of Loyan for exile. His son Chao Lin is charged with the construction of a canal. Some actors are among his workers. The night before departure they enact *The Chao Family Orphan*. In the play, the wicked General Tu-an-Ku provokes the suicide of his servant Chao and his wife, leaving their young son an orphan. Unwittingly, the General adopts and raises the child. Twenty years later they conspire to overthrow the emperor. The orphan discovers his identity through a friend of his parents and vows revenge. After the play, Chao Lin's work on the canal is acclaimed. While surveying, Chao encounters an old woman who tells of his father's fate. Chao immediately plots revenge.

*"Quirkily inventive and sparely elegant... it has the Stravinskian capacity to be both witty and beautiful at the same time."*

*The Daily Telegraph*

# Scipio's Dream



**(1991) 30 MINS**

*Commissioned by BBC TV and AVRO Holland*

**Libretto (English) by the composer, after Metastasio**

**Soprano, Mezzo Soprano, 2 Tenors, Bass**

**SATB chorus (optional)**

**0020/0200/hp.kbd/gtr/2vn.db**

A radical re-composition of Mozart's 'azione teatrale' *Il Sogno di Scipione*. Scipio, a modern office worker, is spending a boring day when suddenly two of his colleagues transform themselves into the goddesses Fortune and Constancy. They insist that he choose between them: Fortune shows him the excitements of following chance and inclination while Constancy, taking him to heaven to meet his heroic ancestors, emphasises the satisfactions of obeying life's obligations dutifully. Scipio has some difficulty in deciding, but in the end chooses Constancy. Fortune is furious and throws him back to earth, where he makes an uncomfortable landing in his office, in the midst of a chorus singing the praises of those who choose rightly.

First Act of 'The Orphan'

104

*♩ = 120 Fast and agile*

**General Tu-an-Ku [Mezzo]**

*♩ = 120 Abrupt v. small clashed cymbals*

Tu-an-Ku enters imperiously

I am General Tu-an-Ku

*ff small Gong*

*(pp) 8va P in the background leggiero*

*(2 Fl.) mf*

**210**

General Tu-an-Ku [Mezzo]

I fear that the wife of Chao - the Loy - al -

8va...

General Tu-an-Ku [Mezzo]

- Civ - il - Ser - vant will have a Son, who

**220**

8va...

General Tu-an-Ku [Mezzo]

may grow up to be my en - e - my!

8va...

*♩ 96 Animato: nervoso* 110

Fl. 1  
Fl. 2  
Cl. 1  
Cl. 2 = Bass Clarinet  
Bsn. 1  
Bsn. 2  
Hrn. 1  
Hrn. 2  
Tbn. 1  
Tbn. 2  
Tbn. 3  
Trp.  
Timp.  
Xyl.  
Viol. I  
Viol. II  
Viola  
Cello  
D. Bass

The Husband and the Friend set out in the direction of the Hill (They are going to fetch the Priest for the Christening). They travel with difficulty over treacherous and menacing terrain.

Senza sord.  
Senza sord.  
Senza sord.  
Senza sord.  
Senza sord.  
pizz.  
Senza sord.  
Senza sord.  
pizz.

MANOPUS SCORE SYSTEM

# THE VANISHING BRIDEGROOM

Commissioned to mark Glasgow's year as European Capital of Culture, *The Vanishing Bridegroom* presents three loosely-related Scottish folk tales taken from J F Campbell's collection *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*.

- I. *The Inheritance*: A man dies, but his legacy is missing: one of his three sons must have stolen it, but which one? The Doctor investigates by telling the sons a tale of a woman, forbidden to marry her lover, and married off to a richer man.
- II. *The Disappearance*: On the birth of the Bride and Bridegroom's daughter, the husband leaves to fetch the Priest who will christen her, but on the way is lured into a brightly lit hillside – the "Land of the Young". His friend is accused of murder.
- III. *The Stranger*: A handsome prosperous stranger arrives to woo the daughter, now a young woman. The girl is suspicious, and a passing preacher tells her he is obviously the Devil: she retires to a holy spot and the Devil is unable to harm her.

## The Vanishing Bridegroom



**(1990) 90 MINS**

Commissioned by Glasgow District Council for Glasgow 1990 City of Culture

**Libretto (English) by the composer**

**Soprano, Mezzo soprano, Tenor, 2 Baritones**

**SSAATTBB chorus (with a number of small roles)**

**2(pic).2(2ca).2(bcl).2/4230/timp.perc/str**

## The Vanishing Bridegroom (Chamber version, arr. Michael Lee)



**(2014) 90 MINS**

**Soprano, Mezzo soprano, Tenor, 2 Baritones**

**SSAATTBB (with a number of small roles)**

**1(pic)1(ca)1(bcl)0/1010/timp(perc)/pf/str(11121)**

"An unsettling and important work... intensely theatrical, the opera boasts music of dramatic energy, narrative immediacy and haunting beauty..."

*Opera Magazine*



For more information visit our website or contact  
your local Wise Music Classical office

**LONDON**

Chester Music Ltd and Novello & Co Ltd  
promotion@wisemusic.com

**NEW YORK**

G. Schirmer, Inc. & Associated Music Publishers, Inc.  
schirmer@schirmer.com

**COPENHAGEN**

Edition Wilhelm Hansen AS  
ewh@ewh.dk

# JUDITH WEIR AT 70

**PARIS**

Wise Music Classical Paris  
classical.paris@wisemusic.com

**BERLIN**

Wise Music Classical Berlin  
classical.berlin@wisemusic.com

**MADRID**

Unión Musical Ediciones  
classical.madrid@wisemusic.com

**SYDNEY**

G. Schirmer Pty Ltd  
classical@wisemusic.com

The music of Judith Weir is exclusively published by Chester Music Limited  
and Novello & Company Limited, part of Wise Music Group

[wisemusicclassical.com](http://wisemusicclassical.com)

© 2021 Wise Music Group