

The Lost Chord

Script by Tim Hopkins

Music in the script

Songs and variations on songs, delivered by four-part and solo singing + cello at different points throughout

- 1 There Was A Time (Gilbert/Sullivan, from *The Gondoliers*)
- 3 Ring the Bell Softly (Smith/Catlin, music)
- 4 The Lost Chord (Proctor/Sullivan)
- 5 Goodnight Beloved (Longfellow)
- 6 I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls / 'The Dream'
(Balfe, from *The Bohemian Girl*)
- 7 Burnt to the Pot (Purcell/Dryden from *King Arthur*)
- 8 The Long Day Closes (Chorley/Sullivan)

Sounds in the Script

Edison cylinder recordings of

The Lost Chord (anon Baritone, 1890s)

The voice of Arthur Sullivan (recorded by friends at a dinner, 1888)

Words by TH, unless stated otherwise.

Parts:

- 1 Daniel
- 2 Geoff
- 3 Nick
- 4 Matt

Cellist Matt

The Audience is seated at a table where a dinner has recently ended. Each place has a label, each label has the name of a mid/late Victorian notable;
eg John Bright, W E Gladstone, F Maskelyne, Eliabeth Garrett Anderson, William Morris, Oscar Wilde, W S Gilbert, J S Parnell...
and 25 others. A fantasy guest list for a dinner which could never have quite occurred.

Musical underlay, (cello)

Lighting on table surface

The speakers voice different personae during the work. As it begins, they have these qualities.

- 1 **Narrator - a diarist, a sentimental journalist, contented family man with grown children.**
- 2 **A veteran soldier, retired to his Surrey villa, widowed.**
- 3 **A restless political adventurer, cultural fantasist, married but estranged. (The cabinet minister and sci-fi writer Bulwer-Lytton in fact.)**
- 4 **Imperial Civil servant, surveyor / map maker, archeologist, suspected of espionage (perhaps rightly) during a Balkan episode. Once involved in a grand passion, rarely revealed, which haunts him.**

Singers begin an ultra-pianissimo chant - on the word 'mine', in triad scales. Over the top of this background, from the head of the table, one of the singers speaks to the audience.

- 1 We gathered as we had always done, the convivial and the erudite, the statesman and the troubadour, in our panelled refuge from the cares of this world.

Not veterans all, but past the bloom of youth, we built our club upon each others' honest company. For a few short hours we could enjoy the story of a triumph, or reveal without vanity a hidden accomplishment, knowing we were amongst the best of friends.

The old soldier could here become the skilled horticulturalist, vividly describing the fruits of his arboretum. The impresario, weary of a world of jewelled illusion, might recall his youthful passion for the outdoor life. The poet could explain the workings of electric light, and the noble engineer could surrender for examination a curious runic stone, exhumed by the brutal archaeology of a lifetime building an empire.

(Each presents a small stone to the audience nearest them: it is passed around)

The lines upon the stone were not quite writing, and not quite image, but seemed nonetheless a sign of conscious Art. Although the events of the evening abide in the memory of every man present, the tiny relic, if that is what it was, seemed at first as innocent as an egg.

If I were told what I tell you now, I would assume the effects of some depraving elixir found in the vile dens of Limehouse. But we were men of the world, not ruined souls.

(His companions look at him - concerned)
We were men of reason, after all.

(He realises his passion is the subject of consternation, and asserts a change of mood.)

1 Conversation was everywhere enjoined!

2 *(taking his cue)* It's berry has a curious shape - quite poisonous of course, but beautiful.

3 In the eye of *this* beholder, they are often one and the same.

4 The batchelor warrior looked rueful. Those nearby sought to change the subject, as a watchful servant poured more wine.

3 At that moment we were joined by our minstrel, late arrived from the Savoy...

(door opens, but no one enters)

ALL What cheer, Sir Arthur?

No one appears. A musical shudder from the cello, as if the temperature has dropped. This resolves into The Lost Chord (text Adelaide Procter, music Arthur Sullivan)

Part A the cast sing the Lost Chord

Part B the Edison Player and its recording of the same, the machine made in 1890, still working, carried around the room.

As it becomes the focus of attention, some or all men disperse to Balcony.

Lighting lights the ceiling. 2 extinguishes all candles, and locates the stone.

3 (Back at the table, examining the stone)

They are from another world (transported to a strange memory)

2 My brother died, you know...

(passes photograph of an empty chair to neighbour)

1 (from balcony or descending, referring to 3)

Bulwar-Lytton gasped as he began to realise what he beheld

2 ...I depended on her, my tender-hearted companion, for all my needs

(passes second photograph of empty chair)

3 (drops stone, which ricochets inside an empty champagne bucket. Laughter from others. 3 begins to sing)

There Was A Time (adapted from The Gondoliers)

(others come to pick up stone: as 1 touches it, he sings with no 3 until it is replaced on table. 4 tries, expecting the same effect, but nothing happens. He studies it with a magnifying glass.)

3 (Reads from science fiction novel The Coming Race,
Bulwer-Lytton)

(candles are re-lit)

2 (over this)

... without her at my side I would have crashed.

This port is quite excellent.

4 *(looks up from the stone)* The beneficial effects of laudanum had returned colour to my thoughts, but not my skin, which resembled the waxed vellum of an early printed book. Could she not see it was quite impossible to continue? I resolved to end the matter once and for all.

2 *(removing cylinder from machine)*

One of my most favourite recreations.

3 *Seizes the stone*

Can this be the work of human hands? I think not.

1 *(reads from a passionate account in Encyclopaedia Britannica 1890s of the laying of a transatlantic cable, glorying in its detail.)*

(Others use tableware to create Morse code-like soundtrack, gradually adding a vocal rhythm (quasi dot dot dot, dot dot dot dash etc) on the text of 'someone has...someone has gone'. Crescendo. Diminuendo. 1 suddenly announces:)

My brother is dead.

Ring the Bell Softly (text W D Smith, music E N Catlin)

1 *(suddenly, softly.)*

Someone had gone.

2 Mr Maskelyne is a conjuror - not a scientist. His claims to higher thinking seem dubious to me. But I am no thinker myself of course.

(2 takes effacing refuge by studying the programme of Maskelyne's entertainments. Meanwhile, 4 and 3 are arguing.)

3 You are wrong.

4 To the disillusioned everything looks black.

3 Your doubts will test out friendship.

4 That was tested long ago.

- 3 She followed her heart!
- 4 ...To her grave.
- 3 You go to far!
- 1 Come, come, Sir James, you know the rules here.
- 4 I fear I must defy them on this occasion. *(Turns to 3)*
It cannot be as you describe. The geology of those
hills would simply not permit such a discovery.
- 3 Then how can this be explained?
- 1 Gentlemen, please!
- 2 I loved her very much, you see. *(no one is listening
to this rare, desperate moment of emotion.)*
- 4 The Etruscans mined gold along the entire peninsula.
That is why I had cause to make a survey of the
region.
- 3 Even a ritual of such ferocious savagery could not
dissuade me. The survival of our race depended on it.
I had to look upon the stone once more...
- 1 I could not dissuade myself from taking what I was
sure would be a catastrophic path. I was drawn to it,
as when first I saw the locomotive pass through the
soil of our ancient Ridgeway, spitting fire and
showering soot into the eyes of sheep, caught in the
teeth of fear. I was but a boy. I never saw the
shepherd weep before, nor smile again.

Goodnight Beloved (Longfellow)

- 2 My cousin Planché, the author, had loved her too.
- 4 The quarries there are the ancestors of your mighty
excavations. Thanks to your kind speed is everything.
- 1 Dorian knew that he had been poisoned. Lord Henry had
poisoned him with a book!
- 4 My interest was antiquarian, not military.
- 2 Pantomines. Planché wrote pantomimes. Scores of
them.
- 3 *(places stone on table)*
- 4 I was not believed.

1 *[touching the stone]*

Might not this new force*[referring to electric lights]*
become a force for ill, a power we might live to see
abused, transfixing all that look upon it, turning men
into blinded animals?

[Releasing the stone]

3 *[Picking it up, sensing a connection between the
stone and the weird behaviour...]*

This volcanic sphere, at large around our table,
seemed to charge the thoughts of all who touched it.

4 *[a quatrain of Burnt to the pot]*

1 "Forget six counties overhung with smoke

Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke

4 Forget the spreading of the hideous town

Think rather of the pack-horse on the down

3 *(touching sphere again - drawn to its power)*

And Dream of London, small and white and clean

The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green

Think that below the bridge the clear lapping waves..."

(Earthly Paradise, William Morris, 1868)

4 *(Picks up a bag with bits of wood in it.)*

1 No! Save them, save them ...

4 I cannot bear the world to taste see their precious
beauty - I will cast them into the waters (exits with bag)

(Silence)

3 My stricken friend had left behind a tiny bundle - two
fragments of genius overlooked. What was their secret? (He
unwraps two small blocks of wood and looks at them.)

1 The artefacts that would have kept us wrapt, the
finest imaginings wrought by William Morris' hand,
were thrown off Hammersmith Bridge, by a keeper of the
flame gone mad.

- 3 (looks at one block) Cupid. (gives it to audience)
(looks at other) Psyche. (gives it to audience.)
- 4 (returns - empty handed. The others look at him. Then sit.)

2 (has the Maskelyne programme - he has to say what is on his mind) ...He went to the theatre. The girl reminded him so strongly of the woman we both had loved, he felt compelled to write and tell me so. At first I did not recognise the urgent hand. Yet as I read her name I felt, or thought I felt an urgency myself, an impulse to stand and cross the room, (he stands) to look again upon an image of her honeyed beauty, to open the book of favourite verse where I kept a lock of her hair. As I turned the page I felt or thought I felt ...

...I cannot say what I thought, what I felt. It was this that led me to your door.

- 1 Places comforting hand upon 2's shoulder. 2 is motionless.

I could observe that he was in a state of considerable agitation. A burden of grief had brought him here - it was my duty to bring him relief.

You there! Your glasses.

My companions and I drained our glasses and turned them to the surface of the table. [All 4 do so]

[to the audience] Without further conference, I now ask you to do the same.

[Roof lights on, table lights out]

The surface of the table drew us in, we hoped to see the shades of those we thought were lost for ever. Our troubled companion heard it first, and saw it.

- 2 I am in Camelot. She is there. Among the stars.

Scéance

- 1 The Dream (Balfe)

(in deconstructed form, leading to a performance in which 2 believes 1 is his dead beloved, or singing with her voice...1 enacts/channels the role of the dead woman, then collapses. 2 is exhausted.)

- 4 (observing 2) The look on his face softened at last. The vibration had been felt by everyone present. The temperature dropped, and the flames rose and fell.

[lighting restored]

- 4 Beef tea. [Bovril is brought in. Try to glue photocopy of an original brand label on new jar]

ALL Sing burst of 'Burnt to the pot' (Old England, from 'king Arthur'

- 3 [Has picked up the stone again.] If I were told what I tell you now, I would assume the effects of some depraving elixir found in the vile dens of Limehouse. But we were men of the world, not ruined souls. We were men of reason, after all. [Puts it down]

- 2 [now reconciled if not healed, observing the anxiety in the others]

- 4 [Picks up stone, and says very quickly]

Yet I knew him to have perished in the Fenian outrage. The incident had been widely reported, and the whole nation had united in grief at the loss of this genius of the age. But my companions behaved as if none of this were so. I began to doubt my wits.

All sing Old England again

- 2 I heard the voice of Tennyson...

- 1 Reads Newspaper report of his death

- 2 Reads Tennyson's **Crossing the Bar.**

- 4 [From the balcony] Not given to flights of fancy, the decoration of the ceiling, and Lord Alfred's words, took me to an Arthurian plane. How we loved Sir Donald's recitations.

- 3 **Reads from The Lady of Shalott. All are drawn to the stone once more. One Kisses it. One holds it to his cheek. One examines it. One blows upon it. A line in the poem breaks the spell - 'the Mirror Crack'd from side to side, 'the curse is come upon me,' cried the Lady of Shallott.'**

4 (Quieter. A little needy.) What Cheer, Sir Arthur?

Noone answers. They sing.

The Long Day Closes (Sullivan)

During the song...

4/1 In years to come we will be no more

2/3 What was her secret...?

1 No one remained but the oldest members. The division bell had been heard and, on this occasion, ignored, by the political élite among us who would set aside parliamentary duty for no one else. The time had come. (**Open envelopes, prompting the audience to open theirs.**)

Our absent friend, among absent friends, was going to speak to us.

The Sullivan voice recording. 3 arranges another cylinder introduces the voice of Arthur Sullivan.

The audience are invited to open envelopes containing cards, which are handwritten transcriptions of Sullivan's after-dinner speech of thanks, recorded in the presence of Edison. On the reverse are pictures of the empty chair. The Four men go to the piano, raise its lid, but do not play a chord. Because the chord is lost. Forever. The four men have disappeared in to the recesses of the room.