

## **UTHAL**

Music by Etienne-Nicolas Méhul

Libretto by J.M.B. Bins de Saint-

First Performance: Opéra-Comique [Théâtre Feydeau], Paris, May 17, 1806

The opera takes place in the midst of a forest close by the sea. It is night.

Malvina has abandoned her husband, Uthal, because he has usurped the throne of her father, Larmor, Chief of Dunthalmor. In the opening scene Larmor embraces his daughter and expresses his joy that she has come to stay with him and comfort him in his misery. In dialogue Larmor tells Malvina that his most faithful bard (later revealed to be Ullin) has gone to Fingal, King of Morven, to tell him his story and that Fingal is now sending his warriors to enable Larmor to gain revenge upon Uthal. Malvina, despite her acknowledgement of Uthal's guilt, still loves her husband, and she begs her father to avoid bloodshed and to seek a more peaceful means of reconciliation. Larmor, however, is adamant. Slowly the Morven soldiers are heard approaching as they sing the praises of Fingal. Their hymn serves as a backdrop as Malvina expresses her fears for her husband and Larmor his eagerness for revenge.

Ullin joins Larmor and Malvina. He relates how the noble Fingal had welcomed him and how, upon hearing the story of Larmor's shame and adversity, Fingal had magnanimously responded to his need for assistance. The Morven warriors pledge themselves to Larmor's cause. In dialogue Larmor bitterly explains how he had married Malvina to Uthal and how, in return, Uthal had stolen his throne and insulted him by telling him he was too old to rule. The warriors respond by calling out for the death of Uthal, Malvina continues to fear for husband and her father, Larmor remains committed to vengeance, and Ullin advises the warriors to await daybreak before striking. To prepare the warriors for the next day's battle, four bards sing a hymn to restful sleep. As the soldiers sleep, Malvina, torn between love for father and her husband, runs into the forest hoping to find someone to listen to her story.

Uthal has arrived in the interior of the forest. Alone on stage, he thinks of his past happiness with Malvina, how she has let him to go to Larmor, and how he has searched everywhere for her. He berates Larmor as the source of his problems, after a moment's doubt about his own behavior. He notices the armed camp (which is Larmor's) and a woman among the warriors who begins to approach her.

Malvina enters, and Uthal is astonished to see her. Malvina does not at first realize the strange warrior is Uthal, and she begs his help and understanding, as she explains the armed preparations, the pending battle, and her father's legitimate thirst for vengeance against her husband. Uthal listens and, disguising his voice, speaks to her. Slowly she begins to suspect the warrior is Uthal and finally recognizes him when he asks whether she hates him because of what he has done to her father. She answers that she does not and that she could not live were he to die in combat with Larmor. When she fully recognizes Uthal, he reproves her for having abandoned him, and she pleads with him to make peace with Larmor. He begs her to leave with him, but she refuses to desert her father. In the course of their duet, Larmor's bards overhear their argument and Ullin and Larmor appear. In dialogue Larmor and Uthal continue to heap accusations upon each other until Malvina separates the two men in an attempt to restore them to reason, if only out of pity for her situation. Uthal admits that he prefers war to relinquishing Larmor's lands under compulsion, which would make him appear to be cowardly. When he asks Malvina to choose between himself and Larmor, Malvina decides that the only moral choice is to stand by her father. Larmor accepts Uthal's challenge, rallying the soldiers to his support. During

the ensemble the bards strike up a war anthem at Larmor's request, and the warriors recapitulate their former pledge to Larmor and go off to battle. Malvina asks the bards for solace, and they respond with the tale of Hidallon - a story of how a son rose against his father, and how the father ultimately forgave the son. Their singing is interrupted by the noise of the battle. Malvina sees her father returning, but there is no sign of Uthal.

Larmor returns to tell Malvina how the Morven forces have defeated Uthal, who is held prisoner. A military march is heard from offstage as the victorious forces return. Uthal, in chains, is brought in. Malvina pleads mercy for him, but Uthal disdains her pity and demands to be executed. Larmor, claiming to be moved by Malvina's pleas, offers Uthal exile instead of death. Uthal replies that he prefers such exile to the condescension he received before his rebellion. Malvina and Ullin agree that exile is too harsh a punishment, but Larmor remains implacable. Finally Malvina, recognizing that Uthal is now in the position of the outcast, says she will join him in exile. Uthal, moved by her devotion, refuses to let her do so. She nonetheless insists she cannot live without her husband and will leave with him, despite Larmor's pleas that she not abandon him in his old age. Malvina is about to depart with Uthal when Uthal acknowledges that Malvina's nobility has subdued his pride; in recognition of that nobility, he falls to his knees and begs Larmor's forgiveness. Larmor says he must match the nobility of his daughter and pardons Uthal. All join in celebrating the happy denouement.