

# Fairest Isle: Purcell's Ode to the Land of Avalon

Henry Purcell's "Fairest Isle" is an exquisite aria from the opera "King Arthur," first performed in 1691. The aria is a poignant ode to the mythical land of Avalon, where King Arthur is said to have been taken after his final battle. With its rich imagery, evocative melodies, and intricate vocal lines, "Fairest Isle" has become one of Purcell's most enduring and beloved works.



## FAIREST ISLE from King Arthur by H. Purcell: for Horn

Quartet by John Gay

★★★★☆ 4.2 out of 5

Language : English

File size : 1127 KB

Screen Reader: Supported

Print length : 370 pages

Lending : Enabled



## The Text of "Fairest Isle"

The text of "Fairest Isle" is by John Dryden, the renowned English poet and playwright. Dryden's words paint a vivid picture of Avalon as a place of peace, beauty, and enchantment:



***“Fairest isle, all isles excelling, Seat of pleasures and of loves;  
Venus here will choose her dwelling, And forsake her Cyprian***

***groves.***

***The groves of Eden, vanish'd now, Only here in us you find,  
Pleasures such as nature ne'er did know, In your happy shores  
we find."***

### **The Music of "Fairest Isle"**

Purcell's music perfectly captures the idyllic beauty and otherworldly charm of Dryden's text. The aria is written in the key of G major, a key often associated with joy and contentment. The melody is flowing and graceful, with long, sustained notes that create a sense of serenity.

The vocal line is intricate and demanding, requiring the singer to have a wide range and a strong technique. The aria begins with a simple, unadorned melody, but as it progresses, the vocal line becomes more elaborate, with melismas and ornaments that add to the sense of beauty and wonder.

The accompaniment to "Fairest Isle" is equally impressive. The strings provide a gentle, supportive bed for the voice, while the continuo adds a rhythmic pulse that propels the music forward.

### **The Historical Context of "Fairest Isle"**

"Fairest Isle" was written during a time of great political and social change in England. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 had overthrown King James II and brought William of Orange and Mary to the throne. This change in regime led to a new era of cultural and artistic expression, in which Purcell played a major role.

"King Arthur" was commissioned by King William and Queen Mary to celebrate their coronation. The opera was a huge success, and "Fairest Isle" became one of Purcell's most popular arias. The aria's popularity was due in part to its evocation of a mythical past, which resonated with the English people's desire for a return to the glory and stability of the Arthurian era.

### **The Legacy of "Fairest Isle"**

"Fairest Isle" has had a lasting impact on English music. The aria has been performed by countless singers over the centuries, and it has been arranged for a variety of instruments. The aria has also been used in film and television, most notably in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film "2001: A Space Odyssey."

Today, "Fairest Isle" is still one of Purcell's most beloved works. The aria's timeless beauty and evocative power continue to enchant audiences around the world.



Avalon, the mythical island where King Arthur is said to have been taken after his final battle.

Image by Edmund Dulac



Henry Purcell, one of the greatest composers of the Baroque era.

Image by Godfrey Kneller



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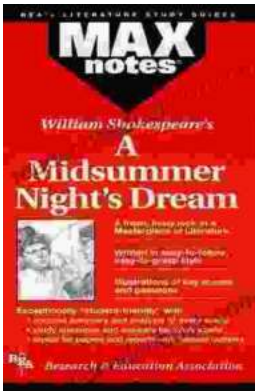
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