ABSTRACT<br>Title of Dissertation:<br>ISLE OF GOLD: A STORY IN MUSIC<br>Matthew David Arling Samson, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2018<br>Dissertation Directed by: Dr. Robert Gibson<br>Department of Music

Out of the great abundance of stories available to humans throughout history, opera composers and their librettists have favored a surprisingly small subset of these stories in the production of their works. Thus, a significant amount of very interesting subject matter has remained largely unexplored by the compositional community. One such seldom attempted story is Plato's tale of Atlantis, both its existence and its fall. At present, only a small handful of composers have attempted large scale musico-dramatic works dealing with the legend, and arguably none of these works have taken hold in the greater operatic canon, if they are even known in the first place. Despite its neglect, this particular legend, which depicts the conflict of an idealized primal state with one ruined by arrogance and both of their eventual destructions by catastrophe, is ripe for interpretation.

This work is an attempt to begin to begin to address the story's neglect. My focus in exploring the topic and composing this stage piece has been foremost on the idea of repetition, and key to that exploration has been the use of carefully structured anachronism. Symbolically, Atlantis can be made to function as a stand-in for nearly any powerful nation or empire in nearly any time period. As such, textually, "the Isle" as it is called in the piece, is ostensibly placed in the distant past; however, there are textual elements that problematize this assumption, such that it could indeed be set in the distant future or even as a continuously repeating event, removed from the normal workings of time.

Similarly, the orchestration consists of essentially only instruments present in an early baroque orchestra, and while they are generally asked to play in a conventionally baroque style, the harmonic, melodic, and formal material is decidedly contemporary. Furthermore, from time to time, both the instruments and voices are asked to perform techniques and in styles borrowed from many different times and places.

All these elements and others taken together serve to underscore the universality and timelessness of the tale, especially highlighting its relevance to the modern world and our place in it.

# ISLE OF GOLD: A STORY IN MUSIC 

by<br>Matthew David Arling Samson

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## Preface

Upon examination of the score, it will likely become apparent that Isle of Gold does not necessarily appeal to the conventions or vocabulary of contemporary composition and, as such, perhaps requires at least some amount of explanation. Most notably, a soprano castrato is called for to sing the main role, but there are a number of smaller details that perhaps also warrant explanation, such as an atypical approach to recitative and other like elements. Indeed, even before the score itself is examined, the very subtitle "a story in music" as a genre marker deserves some level of clarification.

So, to begin there, the subtitle raises the question, "Why not 'an opera?'" The answer is that, quite simply, the piece is not strictly an opera. While it is true that the majority of the work's genre markers do point to opera, specifically early Baroque opera, a still significant number of markers point to other sorts of works, some of which are precursors to opera, some of which descend from opera, and some which have little to do with it. In so mixing these genres, a sort of concept piece emerges for which, perhaps, no true precedent exists. Specifically, the work bears elements of oratorio, musical drama (of the Broadway sort), classical Greek drama, the mystery play, liturgical drama, liturgy itself, and, very importantly, the closet drama; roughly speaking, closet drama is a genre of play that is not meant to be staged but to be read. With that understanding, the use of a castrato in the score, or an entire Baroque orchestra as well in this case, need not require an
actual castrato or Baroque orchestra for performance; rather, the piece should be understood as having an ideal performance that is currently only possible in the imagination, as is, in point of fact, the case with all Baroque music. That being said, when or if performed (for indeed, a number of closet dramas are performed regularly), the considerations taken in order to stage a Baroque opera are essentially the same considerations that should be taken in order to stage Isle of Gold, which will be discussed further in the performance considerations.

As a sort of "closet opera" or, perhaps, literal "concept piece," the score has been generally made to follow the conventions of the early 17th-century, having only been "updated" to modern notation for the purposes of legibility for the modern reader but not necessarily for the modern performer, as in the manner of, for instance, a scholarly performing edition. With that said, contemporary early musicians, as well as some sorts of church musicians, should generally have no issue with reading the score as it is.

The purpose of such an approach to preparing the score and the music itself is that, in this case, it reinforces certain thematic elements present in both the libretto and musical material. Specifically, the work's displacement in time is used to underscore the cyclicity of human history and, importantly, the cyclicity of human folly. Thus, in presenting the Atlantis legend, Isle of Gold depicts an Atlantis that, in essence, happened not just once, but many times. It happens today, and it will happen again.

As mentioned, this cyclicity is built into the musical and textual material as well. Both the musical form and the form of the libretto are chiastic, or
structured as a ring, though in music, this is referred to as arch form (e.g.

ABCDCBA). This is true at the macro level, on the scale of the whole piece, but also within each act (if scene VII is considered as belonging to both acts), within each scene, and even within a number of the small-scale melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic motifs and gestures. In the music, this is generally meant to mirror the equivalent construction of the libretto, though the purpose for this construction in the libretto goes beyond mere cyclicity and repetition. Ring form (or chiastic structure) is used for the libretto in order to parallel the construction of a great deal of ancient mythological and sacred literature. Though this form is used occasionally today in literature, it was much more common in ancient times, particularly during the 8th-century BCE, during which time the Hebrew Bible was just beginning to be composed (though, ring structure was used for a good deal of scriptural and mythic literature composed much later as well, including the New Testament, the Qur'an, the Odyssey, and others). ${ }^{1}$ The construction of the libretto in the manner of ancient mythological literature, again, serves to underscore the universality of the work, highlighting particularly its relationship and resemblance to other mythic literary traditions.

This is accomplished by presenting the story not as it is told by Plato in the Timaeus or Critias, but as a sort of ur- or parent myth to, and unification of,

[^0]the myriad religious flood myths, a number of the fall of man/expulsion from paradise myths, and myths of divine judgement, among others. Using the methods of comparative mythology (though adapted for creative purposes), the most significant myths to which the libretto is related are Plato's Atlantis (obviously), the Hebrew Noah, the Babylonian and Akkadian Xiusudra/Utnapishtim, the Indian Manu, ancient Egypt’s Zp Tpj, several assorted North American flood myths, the Hebrew Adam and Eve, the Persian Yima, and the Hebrew Sodom and Gomorrah. As it was an aim of the piece to embody a sort of universality, the Christian and Greek elements of the source material are downplayed in favor of those more foreign to western culture, particularly the Indian and Persian elements.

All these elements and considerations taken together should hopefully clarify the nature of the piece and provide a sufficient understanding of how and why the piece exists as it does. They should also begin to elucidate how one might approach performing the work, should they so choose, though that will be discussed further below in the performance considerations.

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge my two composition teachers here at University of Maryland, Dr. David Froom and Dr. Robert Gibson. Their careful guidance has been instrumental in my growth during these final stages of my graduate compositional training, and it has simply been a joy and pleasure studying and learning with them.

Secondly, I would like to acknowledge my wife, Rachel Arling Samson. I would not have been able to complete this dissertation were it not for the immense effort and hard work that she has put into keeping me on track and productive. Her love and care have enabled me to pursue my dreams, which, in my mind, is almost certainly the greatest gift a person could ever give to their spouse.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my mother, Alexandra Samson, whose practice in life it has been to put her children first, in all circumstances, with little regard to her own wants or needs. Her constant encouragement and support is largely responsible for my pursuing of this degree in the first place, and her frequent words of inspiration and motivation have seen me through even the most difficult challenges, both in my education and in life.

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## Performance Considerations

As was mentioned in the preface, this score is presented basically as if the manuscript were composed during the early Baroque period and updated with modern notation perhaps sometime between the 19th century and the present day. As such, essentially, the performance considerations that should be made for the performance of an actual Baroque work are generally the same considerations that should be made for the performance of this work. However, because a scoreaccurate performance of the work was never possible to begin with, in some sense, Isle of Gold, if performed today, is meant to be performed imperfectly. But beyond that, it is also meant to be performed creatively. For instance, while it is true that many compromises and adjustments are made today in order to produce as-accurate-as-possible performances of Baroque works, quite divergently, plenty of performers will approach these works in novel (and completely inauthentic, though perhaps perfectly valid) ways. Beyond the fairly standard practice of performing Baroque music on modern instruments, it is quite common to encounter much more adventurous approaches, such as, for instance, metal or electronic covers of Baroque works and their like. Whereas with actual Baroque music, this is a simple side effect of both our great distance in time from the original works (and their existence in the public domain) as well as our lack of understanding of Baroque performance practice, with the present work, this is indeed an intended feature.

Nonetheless, while it is the case that nearly any sort of interpretation of the work is valid, for those who may wish to perform a score-accurate interpretation of the piece, one which conforms to Baroque performance practice (and the practices of the several other source genres, particularly chant), some explanation may be required (though, again, as mentioned above in the preface, there is generally nothing present in this score which would not be readily understood by modern period players and the church musicians of several different denominations, particularly Anglicans and Episcopalians).

It would not be feasible to fully explicate the intricacies of Baroque performance practice or chant performance practice in this brief outline, especially where exhaustive materials have already been dedicated specifically to said tasks (especially given that there are numerous different schools of thought and practice on the subjects), but the main considerations have to do with ornamentation, phrasing, and improvisation, both in the continuo and elsewhere, and, in the case of chant, it should simply be necessary to explain the three types mentioned in the score. However, given the necessary brevity of the following comments, they should be understood merely as a starting point, such that the most score-accurate performance of the work would incorporate performance practice beyond what is mentioned here; that is to say, those players best equipped to perform the piece as written will already have a fairly extensive understanding of the practices involved or would be motivated to seek out the proper materials to fully learn and understand them for themselves.

With regard to ornamentation, Baroque practice generally allowed for the introduction of ornamentation at will (in addition to any explicitly marked ornamentation), but obviously some amount of discretion was required to do so appropriately and with taste. The initial statement of a theme, for instance, should almost certainly not be ornamented, but subsequent iterations could be. Repeated sections, especially in the case of da capo arias, could be ornamented. However, in both cases, or all cases rather, simply adding many notes for the sake of adding notes is not appropriate; all ornamentation should serve the purpose of reinforcing the mood or affect of a given passage of music.

Phrasing and dynamics in the Baroque period differ fairly significantly from modern practice. For stringed instruments, crescendi and diminuendi are accomplished using bow speed, without the use of vibrato; vibrato was generally understood as an ornament for all instruments and voices. Movement toward and away from strong beats essentially functions as a sort of miniature phrase for any given measure; in other words, whereas in contemporary music, a passage with no marked dynamic might be fairly placid, an unmarked passage in Baroque music and in the current work might feature, in triple meter for instance, a very strong downbeat followed by a considerable drop in dynamic on the second beat, with a crescendo through the third beat back to a very strong downbeat, and so on and so forth.

Lastly, an understanding of the extent to which Baroque music was improvised is likely necessary to most accurately interpret the score. For instance, much like a modern lead sheet, figured bass was used in notating the basso
continuo part. Contrary to much contemporary interpretation of figured bass, Baroque interpretations were often quite adventurous and improvisatory, of course always matching the style and mood of a given section, but also adding a number of ornaments and figures that many musicians today would associate with modern jazz and other contemporary genres (e.g. flat 9, 13, unresolved 4 against a 4-3 resolution, etc.). In the current work, many of these sorts of figures exist already, but their use need not be restricted to the places in which they are explicitly marked. If a less conventional figure seems appropriate in a given passage where there is none, then the performer should feel free to include in it their realization (of course, appropriately or collectively with any other members of the continuo that may also be playing at the time). Beyond appropriate basso continuo improvisation, there is also the matter of percussion. Many percussion parts in the Baroque were not notated by the composer, but rather decided by the performer. To some extent, many of the details of this practice are lost to us today, as the secrets of the old percussion guilds generally died with them. Nonetheless, some things are known about how percussionists fit into the Baroque orchestral texture; for instance, one common technique was for a drummer or other percussionist to simply play an embellished version of the main rhythm, as is the case in the current work in the opening timpani part, for instance (in contrast to our modern practice of generally playing a complementary rhythm, as with a drum set, though this sort of figuration does appear in the work as well in, for instance, the third scene). That being the case, the percussion parts for Isle of Gold should probably be most appropriately largely improvised by the players.

Notated parts have been included mainly as a courtesy, particularly for the purpose of elucidating mood, but should not be understood as exclusively valid. If, however, the performer or performers do not feel comfortable improvising their own parts or simply do not wish to go to the trouble to do so, the included parts may, of course, be used.

The last important aspect of the work is the use of chant where generally recitative would have been used historically. This has the dual purpose of emphasizing the liturgical aspects of the work, but it also functions as a way to imagine opera had it evolved differently, as recitative grew out of falsobordone, which has its own roots in monody and chant. Early notated recitative would have sounded nearly identical to contemporaneous excerpts of falsobordone. ${ }^{2}$ Falsobordone is hardly complicated to explain; it consists simply of chanting notes, in which multiple words are sung on a single pitch, followed by either metered or unmetered cadential patterns. In Isle of Gold, this is not always exactly the configuration of elements (e.g. sometimes one chanting note follows another), but in these cases, the intended result is self-evident.

A few chant sections in the work are marked as plainchant ("canto piano"), as opposed to the more common marking of falsobordone. Technically speaking, plainchant can be thought of as including falsobordone, as well as Gregorian chant and other sorts of chant as well. The reason for marking specific sections as plainchant and not falsobordone, then, is to emphasize those sections'

[^1]relation to actual liturgical chant and to deemphasize their relation to recitative. As such, these sections should be performed perhaps more soberly or subduedly, though ultimately, this is a judgement for the director, conductor, and performers to make. Furthermore, these can be understood as opportunities for the performers to emphasize the liturgical elements of the work. For instance, at the end of Scene X, where Aitor and Amari dialogue, but in which Amari's words are sung also by the chorus, this matches almost exactly the manner in which responsorial psalms are chanted in the Anglican or Episcopal church (and perhaps others as well), and should, thus, probably adhere to the performance practice thereof. For the most part, if falsobordone is understood, so too is this. However, one practice to note is that within each couplet, at the bar line, each singer or group of singers should pause or rest for a not-insignificant amount of time while the instruments sustain beneath them before moving on to the next phrase. Then between each couplet, when moving from one singer or group to the other, at the bar line, there should be little to no space, to the point of nearly overlapping.

Finally, at this point, all instances of Anglican chant ("canto Anglicano") should be nearly self-explanatory, as the method of their execution is nearly identical to falsobordone; the only true distinction is that Anglican chant is always sung in four parts (specifically in this piece, that is), and falsobordone is usually sung as a solo (again, specific to this piece). Also, each Anglican chant section is composed such that it follows specific rules regarding the number of chanting notes and moving notes per verse, but this is not something that the performer need be concerned with. It should be noted, however, that the half note and
quarter note in Anglican chant are not held for specific rhythmic values, despite possessing stems; they are sung as one might sing recitative, that is, only as long as they need to be given the words that are to be sung.

## Isle of Gold

a story in music

Matthew Arling Samson

## ISLE OF GOLD

A story in music<br>In two acts<br>or thirteen scenes

The words made by Mr. Matthew Arling Samson
The music composed by the same
for Mom and Rachel

# Dramatis Personae 

Aitor, soprano castrato one of nine lesser kings
Unai, countertenor
Aitor's right hand
Amari, soprano
high priestess of the Isle
The Emissary, contralto
messenger of a foreign queen
Eneko, tenor
Aitor's nephew and heir
Kemen, bass-baritone
high king of the Isle and the nine kingdoms
Citizens, Kings and other officials, their Attendants,
Soldiers, Priestesses, Beggars,
The Sacred Bulls, among many other sorts of animals, \&c.

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## Instruments

2 Alto Recorders
2 Cornetti2 Clarini
2 Tenor Sackbutts (or Alto and Tenor)1 Bass Sackbutt
Timpani in E and D
Antique Cymbals
Tambourine
Field Drum
Long Drum
Treble Viol I
Treble Viol II (or Tenor Viol I)
Tenor ViolBass ViolViolone
Continuo:
GuitarCittern
Lute
Theorbo
Triple Harp
Harpsichord
Organ

ACT I

## Isle of Gold ACT I

Scene I
The people celebrate along the King's Highway. The
Matthew Arling Samson High King of the Isle has conquered his enemies.










$\mp$


The High King stands before the people.











${ }_{100}$ From the crowd, a lesser king.


$\equiv$







## Scene II

In the chambers of the royal court, the kings gather in council and pay tribute to the High King.



















$\mp$



















$\rightleftharpoons$


















## Scene III

Along the highway of the king, Aitor and Unai travel to the docks.




Un.





$\rightleftharpoons$









Tamer



Unai exits.



## Scene IV

Aitor awaits his nephew's arrival.


The city coruscates with treasures.




Falsobordone, colla voce








$\rightleftharpoons$






$\rightleftharpoons$

$\mp$

$\equiv$









Aitor and Eneko enter the Mother's Temple.
The High Priestess comes to them.


Cont.






The High Priestess offers tribute to the Mother.












## Scene V

A messenger arrives to summon Aitor from his chambers.


$\equiv$

$\equiv$

$\rightleftharpoons$

$\equiv$

$\equiv$

























$\mp$









## Scene VI

The High King is come to the Mother's Temple.




$\rightleftharpoons$


Amari conjures a vision in the waterfall.
A piacere del maestro









Molto lento e con rubato

$\mp$












$\equiv$

Falsobordone, colla voce






## Scene VII

The crowds gather at the palace gates.






$=$



The head of the emissary is presented to the crowd.
They cheer with terrific fervor.










Kmn.







The bull is slaughtered.
The High King drinks his fill.

$\sum$


$\mp$











ACT II

## ACT II

## Scene VIII

Aitor washes at dawn.


Falsobordone, colla voce







Unai conjures a vision in the smoke and the haze.
Destruction lies before them.











Un.








## Scene IX

Kemen travels the highway to the docks.






$\rightleftharpoons$




The body of the Emissary, wrapped in the branch of the olive tree, is revealed.






## Scene X

Aitor seeks Amari at the Mother's Temple.














Tempo sereno









S10








Night has fallen.
Aitor, Amari, and their companies return to one another.











## Scene XI

That same night, having been summoned to the palace, Eneko arrives to meet
Kemen.





(

$\mp$

Enk.
$=$


\footnotetext{
 you should fol-low a path not of his mak - ing. You know in your heart I_ speak the truth, my son. Do not be trou - bled by it.


Cont.









$\mp$





$\rightleftharpoons$



## Scene XII

Aitor scours the city for his nephew. Upon the highway, he makes his way towards to docks.


Aitor finds himself and his nephew at the docks.
Come un orologio



























































[^0]:    ${ }^{1}$ There are several aspects and conventions of ring structure that were generally observed throughout the centuries that have also been observed in Isle of Gold, such as special indicators to mark individual sections and central loading (or, roughly speaking, placing the most important thematic development in the center of the work instead of, for instance, as in Aristotelian plot construction, roughly two thirds or three quarters through the work during a climax), among several others. A full explication of ring structure is not quite feasible to cover in this brief preface, but a more thorough understanding can be found in several books and essays on the subject, notably Mary Douglas’s "Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition."

[^1]:    ${ }^{2}$ For instance, see Monteverdi’s use of falsobordone in his "Sfogava con le Stelle" from his 1603 Fourth Book of Madrigals. It is almost indistinguishable from his use of recitative in the prologue to Orfeo without examining the scores.

