

"Gainsborough's Duchess"

By

Albert CoatesLibretto and Lyrics by C. Reginald Grundy.

The opera plays in the late 18th, century
The action takes place within 24 hours.

SynopsisAct 1 Scene 1. Front sitting-room in Gainsborough's House.

Peggy, Gainsborough's youngest daughter, is practising her dancing, in anticipation of the coming Ball at Ranelagh, in the evening. Molly, her sister, and secretly in love with Johann Fischer, the Prince's Oboe-player, is sadly working at a dress. Mrs Gainsborough enters irritated at the many bills, it is her lot to receive, she is always worrying about finances. James, the Butler enters, bringing a letter from Fischer, to Molly. Fischer is waiting outside in the rain. Molly overjoyed. Furious banging at the door. Enter Sir Thomas Tolley, very drunk, canvassing for Charles Fox. Tolley has many followers. Almost a fight ensues between Tolley and the Beadle. Gainsborough enters, Ale all round, which finally puts Sir Thomas under the table, literally, and he is carried out, amid "Country is going to the Dogs". Fischer enters unobserved. Duet with Molly. A difference of opinion about "Handel was greater than Bach", between the two, is stopped by the entrance of the Duchess, who has come to "sit" for her Portrait... Fischer seeks cover under the Sofa...the Duchess finally, after a jolly scene, promises to sponsor the marriage between Molly and Fischer.

30 min

Act 1. Scene 2. Gainsborough's Studio.

Miss Foyle, the Harp-player, is being painted by the Artist. Gainsborough was a keen collector of musical instruments and coveted Miss Foyle's Harp. He hopes to exchange the Harp for the Portrait, but Miss Foyle is in love with Gainsborough and makes the most of the situation, much to the discomfort of the Artist, who has to kiss her "Good-bye", which the Duchess unfortunately sees as she enters the Studio. The Duchess is, first of all annoyed at having been kept waiting for her Sitting, and secondly, she is helping him to make a great name in London and all this is rather disturbing to a great ladyso the Sitting is becoming a little difficult, the Duchess is determined to quarrel with Gainsborough and does...First of all Gainsborough will not vote for Fox...then, she does not think the portrait makes her look youthful enough, then she does not like the hat, in the portrait, decides Gainsborough should "remove" the hat....Gainsborough assures her Grace, that she might like the hat "tomorrow", where-upon, the Duchess informs him that, "he could then paint in the Hat, again", but at present and today, she does not like the hat, Gainsborough driven to distraction refuses to alter the portrait, the Duchess insists and finally the Artist loses his temper and blackens the face in the portrait....

23 min

Act 1. Scene 3. Gainsborough's Studio, the same evening.

Mrs Gainsborough is searching for the portrait of the Duchess of Devonshire to see if there is a possibility of a quick sale, in order to pay the bills. The two girls enter, each of them in turn rather frightening their mother, intent on her search...

continued Act 1 scene 3

a great deal of fun and romping, in which the portrait comes to light... Mrs Gainsborough is heart-broken at the ruined portrait. Miss Foyle enters, much surprise on both sides. Gainsborough enters and explains Miss Foyle promised to deliver the Harp. Gainsborough wants to give the portrait of Miss Foyle in exchange, as promised, but Mrs Gainsborough has other ideas, as naturally the portrait would fetch at least 60 guineas, whereas the Harp is a liability,the scene ends with much fun, and the exit of Miss Foyle, without her portrait....and furious at the girls.

12 mins

Act 2. Scene 1. The Grounds at Ranelagh.

A beautiful scene, moonlight, great charm and poetry. The Duchess alone sings about "Peace broods". Enter Lord Beechmaster and Gainsborough, all are masked. A quarrel ensues. Gainsborough then serenades the Duchess, "Most glorious Goddess". The Master of ceremonies announces the dancing. "Song of the May" and "Roger de Coverley". Midnight strikes. All unmask, the Prince Regent is recognised, the Duchess is crowned Queen of the May by Gainsborough and all sing "God bless our noble Prince", during the song Gainsborough is pestered by Miss Foyle, who afterwards out of spite, tells Beechmaster and Aspen a highly embroidered version of the blackened portrait. Lord Beechmaster promised Miss Foyle that he will help her to take revenge on Gainsborough.

20 mins

Intermezzo of 5 minutes musicAct 2. Scene 2. The Prince's Supper Party in the Grounds at Ranelagh.

The end of the Supper Party. The Prince is singing. ~~The Intrigue.~~ Beechmaster and Aspen come with the news about the blackened portrait. ~~The sound of~~ the approaching bridal-party, ^{with the music} is heard and the Duchess singing "Gone is Winter Gloom". The Prince kisses the bride, as he has sponsored her at the Duchess' request and she unveils. Gainsborough is taken aback as he recognises Molly, but forgives them and promises his help, in their future life, together. The Prince begins a Roundelay and the music in the Rotunda begins again. Most of the guests depart, when Lord Beechmaster approaches ~~the Duchess and~~ ^{the Duchess} sees an opportunity in provoking her by telling her, that as she was so generous to Molly, Gainsborough might be induced to remove the black from her portrait! ^{See next} The Duchess feels that Gainsborough has been spreading reports about her and is indignant so when the artist approaches her, she insults him before the assembled guests....The Prince is amused, ^{The Prince} when Lord Beechmaster makes a rhyme about "the Queen of Spades" and comes forward to ask Gainsborough, "to see the Portrait". Gainsborough agrees, but the Duchess only sees in this a further insult and deliberately tells everybody, that "she is not very interested in her portrait and if one wants a real portrait one should go to Reynolds"...Gainsborough is entirely crushed. The Duchess sweeps out, followed by the Prince leaving Gainsborough to the tender mercies of the ruthless Beechmaster and the other Courtiers. Lord Aspen, ^{enjoys} enjoying the situation, but never-the-less ^{stops} the quarrel, which he feels is impending, suggests a Toast to "Sweethearts", which all sing in chorus....Gainsborough does not drink the toast and suddenly rises to his feet in a towering rage and sings a toast to "the Serving Maids of England"....this is too much for Beechmaster who draws his sword and a duel ^{takes place} is being fought, in which Gainsborough disarms Beechmaster and at the point of the sword, forces him to drink the toast to the "Serving maids", after which Gainsborough crashes his glass to the ground and as the curtain descends leaves amid jeers and laughter, from the courtiers.

17 mins

Act 3. scene 1. The Duchess of Devonshire's Boudoir.

After a very dramatic interlude of music, depicting the turmoil through which the past events have re-acted on her mind, the Curtain rises showing the Duchess' Boudoir, with her Maid expecting her return from Ranelagh. The Duchess enters, dismisses the maid and restlessly goes to the Window, to try and find some solution to her troubles....On opening the Casement, the peace and silence of the night comforts her, a Nightingale is singing in the garden the Duchess sings the "Nightingale Song".

Black out.

5 min

Act 3. scene 2. Same as before, but early in the morning.

The Duchess enters her Boudoir as the strains of the May Day songs are heard under her window. The Duke enters. The Duchess feels the interview will not be pleasant and pretends a headache. The Duke has heard of the Scandal. Exit Duke. When the Duke has gone several ladies of the Court are announced. They have come to tell the Duchess that Gainsborough should be punished for insulting her. They pretend to be scandalized but are, secretly inquisitive for more news. The Duchess, meanwhile is losing patience and finally upsets them all by telling her maid to bring her Costume, which she wears for the Portrait, as she intends to visit Gainsborough and to "sit" for her Portrait, as usual.... The ladies leave... Duchess now contemplates the situation, she does not know what to do... shall she ignore Gainsborough and all his works, or shall she remain his good friend and defend him, even against the Prince, if necessary? - "Should I go" is the question arising from the turmoil in her mind.....She decides to go.

Act 3. scene 3. Gainsborough's Studio, the same morning.

The scene opens in G's Studio. The Bailiff has come to remove the furniture. Mrs Gainsborough is in tears, Molly and Peggy dismayed. The bell rings and Miss Foyle and Fischer enter and also Gainsborough. The Artist has ordered Miss Foyle and his family to be present as he wishes to know who spread the scandal. The Scandal is finally brought home to Miss Foyle and Gainsborough gives her portrait to the Bailiff to sell in order to pay the bills. Miss Foyle is horrified and rushes off to pay for the portrait. Meanwhile Mrs Gainsborough discovers that Molly and Fischer are betrothed and becomes almost hysterical. Gainsborough asks them all to leave the Studio. *As* Gazes at the spoilt portrait of the Duchess. In a beautiful song "Lady Disdain" he proceeds to clean it, a simple task... as "The Duchess never suspected it was a mere splotter of Lamp-black, which a wet rag would remove"....As he completes this work, the Duchess, unannounced, stands hesitatingly at the door, leading into the Studio...she has difficulty in finding words, but her presence proves to him that she is indeed his friend. James nervously tells of the arrival of the Prince and his Court, who are about to enter the Studio. Gainsborough has just enough time in which to show the Duchess that her Portrait has been restored to its former perfection.... Gainsborough now plays a game with His Royal Highness and takes revenge on the Courtiers, the Duchess plays up to this revenge and much fun ensues, but great discomfort to the Courtiers.....with a captivating smile the Prince turns to Gainsborough and says "You must let me "sit" to you, for through your masterly insight, you have conquered all our hearts"....Beechmaster and Aspen are reprimanded by the Prince and told that " the country air will do you good and you will not see life in such black colors"....the Prince exits, taking the Duke with him. Gainsborough and the Duchess are left alone. She quietly takes her position for the Portrait, Gainsborough kneels before her and kisses her hand and in great reverence and respect calls her "his Divinity and Guardian Angel", she, without his knowledge touches the top of his head with her lips. The Opera closes, leaving us to realize that the love between these two people

13 min
The Bailiff has come to remove the furniture as the bill will have not been paid.



(continued)

had reached its highest point in sublime understanding and self-sacrifice. For us remains the unforgettable portrait of "the Duchess of Devonshire" by Thomas Gainsborough"

23 minutes