

"GAINSBOROUGH'S DUCHESS"

By  
ALBERT COATES

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Libretto and Lyrics by C. Reginald Grundy  
Dramatic version and production by Vladimir Rosing

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



FIRST SCENE

The Gainsborough family are expecting the Duchess of Devonshire to come and sit for her portrait. Meanwhile, Molly, the elder of Gainsborough's two daughters, has managed (with the help of Peggy, her younger sister, and James, the man-servant) to see Mr. Fischer, Court oboe player with whom she is in love and who has been forbidden the house by both her parents. During the interview the Duchess is announced and Fischer is unable to escape and must, therefore, hide under the sofa.

During an amusing scene he is discovered by the Duchess who sees a real love between the two and promises to help to obtain Gainsborough's permission to their marriage. She meanwhile invites them all to a garden fete at Ranelagh that evening.

SECOND SCENE

The scene opens in Gainsborough's studio where he is painting a portrait of Miss Foyle, a harpist. He is doing this in order to exchange the portrait for Miss Foyle's harp (Gainsborough was a fine musician himself and played the Viola de Gamba as well as the harp, in fact he collected musical instruments), but the lady who has a tender passion for Gainsborough thinks that he is in love with her.

A stormy scene ensues between them in which Gainsborough is finally obliged to kiss the lady in order to obtain the harp. This tender moment is seen by the Duchess as she enters the studio and who has meanwhile been kept waiting longer than usual. An amusing scene now takes place between the Duchess and Gainsborough. She does all she can to make the sitting as difficult as possible, is extremely capricious and finally on her complaining that the portrait does not make her youthful enough and the hat in the portrait does not suit her and, therefore, tells Gainsborough to remove the hat. Gainsborough assures her Grace that she might like to have the hat painted in again at the next sitting, in case he removes it. She assures him that anyhow he must remove it now. Gainsborough objects and in a temper blackens the face in the portrait. Her Grace is upset but nevertheless is secretly amused, as she admires and is extremely devoted to Gainsborough. *There is a song for Gainsborough in this scene called "Landscape"*

ACT II      Scene 1

"The Garden at Ranelagh"

A beautiful moonlight scene of great charm and poetry. The two lovers, Molly and Fischer, discuss the blackened portrait and are overheard by Miss Foyle who sees an opportunity of revenge on Gainsborough and on meeting Lord Beechmaster, who has been snubbed by the Duchess, tells him the whole tale of the blackened portrait and the romance between Gainsborough and the Duchess. The tale rapidly becomes more and more exaggerated.



As the evening progresses the Duchess is chosen as the Queen of the May. There is much dancing and hilarity and the Prince (afterward George the IV) makes his appearance. In this scene there are two beautiful lyrics, one "Nightingale" in which records have been taken of a real nightingale and are used in the orchestra in the accompaniment of the song, and "Most Beauteous Goddess of the Night" which sung by Gainsborough, becomes a duet between himself and the Duchess.

SCENE 2"The Prince's Supper Party"

The Prince has been asked by the Duchess to give his protection to the young couple (Fischer and Molly) so in his presenting them to the assembled guests, Gainsborough discovers in the betrothed pair his daughter, Molly.

Beechmaster sees an opportunity in provoking the Duchess by telling her that "as she was so generous to Molly, Gainsborough might be induced to remove the black from her portrait!" The Duchess feels that Gainsborough has been spreading reports about her and the scene ends with her insulting Gainsborough before the assembled guests. Gainsborough in his turn has a duel with Lord Beechmaster in which he forces his Lordship to drink a toast to the "serving maids" of old England! He finally smashes his glass on the ground and furiously leaves the supper room, but not before he has been persuaded by the Prince to show him the portrait the next morning! -

ACT III Scene 1"The Duchess' Boudoir"

*It is night* The Duchess has just returned from Ranelagh. She is perturbed at the prospect of the Prince and the court visiting Gainsborough's studio to see the spoilt portrait. She realizes her affection for the great painter and feels she would like to help him to, if necessary, repaint the portrait before he is disgraced and, therefore, in a beautiful scene she decides to go early in the morning and take her sitting as usual and in spite of seeming ridiculous she will face the whole world! - in her efforts to protect Gainsborough.

SCENE 2"Early 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 objects to the scandal he has heard with regard to the Duchess and Gainsborough, but cannot be too serious as the Duchess reminds him of his affection for Lady Betty Foster, much to his own discomfort! When the Duke leaves the room various acquaintances of the Duchess are announced who have come to tell her that Gainsborough should be punished for insulting her. They pretend to be scandalized but are secretly inquisitive as to further news. The Duchess meanwhile is losing patience and finally upsets them all by telling her maid to bring her dress as she intends to visit Gainsborough to sit for her portrait as usual!



SCENE 3

The scene opens in Gainsborough's studio. The Bailiff has come to remove the furniture as the bills have not been paid. 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 but rushes out to pay for her portrait. Meanwhile Mrs. Gainsborough discovers that Molly and Fischer are betrothed and becomes almost hysterical. Gainsborough asks them all to leave the studio and gazes at the spoilt portrait. In a beautiful song, "Lady Disdain", he proceeds to clean it, a simple task as he had only smeared lamp black on the portrait, which a damp cloth can remove in a moment! As he finishes it, suddenly the Duchess appears at the door unannounced. A beautiful scene takes place now which is interrupted by James, nervously telling of the arrival of the Prince and his Court, who are about to enter the studio. Gainsborough shows the portrait to the Prince who is astonished at the exquisite beauty of the work and tells Gainsborough he, himself, wishes to be his next sitter!! The courtiers meanwhile, not knowing what has been taking place, find there is nothing wrong with the portrait and are completely nonplussed but nevertheless are hurried into speech by Lady March who whispers "Bray, donkeys, bray!" which they accordingly do! -

The prince takes his leave and the Duchess and Gainsborough are left alone. He kneels before her, kisses her hand and in great reverence and respect calls her "his" Divinity and Guardian Angel." The Duchess stoops and without his knowledge, touches the top of his head with her lips.

The Opera closes with the most exquisite music and the Curtain falls, leaving us to our own thoughts and realization that the great love between these two people had reached its zenith in sublime understanding and self-sacrifice; and what remains to the future is the unforgettable portrait of the "Duchess of Devonshire" by Thomas Gainsborough.