

A Brief History of Masques
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Last year I had the “brilliant idea” that we should put on a masque, like the works performed in the court of Queen Elizabeth I. I started telling all of my friends that I wanted to put on a Masque, but since you can’t HEAR the spelling, they thought I was talking about the thing you put on your face. Well, we’ve done that! So I wanted to introduce this concept to the SCA. Of course, because I am me, I started my research with the fabulous costumes by Inigo Jones, but went back to see where this theatrical style had started come from. It was very interesting to learn about the evolution from intermissions to grand operas and eventually led me to write my very own masque, An SAC Masque.

The intermezzi started in 15th c. Italy as a light piece set between more serious fare by Homer, Plautus, and Terrence. The performances used costumes, singing, instrumental music, dancing, miming, acting, and grand torch light processions. They were made popular by Lorenzo Medici, who expanded them into more elaborate and involved pieces. They were performed at society weddings, coronations, and holy days. Intermezzi tended to run upon classical themes including the personification of ideals, Greek and Roman mythology, and hero tales. These classical themes were used to relate modern concerns and political commentary, alternatively bolstering the reputation of the ruling family or tearing them down, without danger of coming right out and saying something. There was a lot of double meaning built into the songs and poems and these short intermezzi were often talked about long after the play was forgotten.

As the intermezzi became more popular throughout the 15th c. they eventually became so long and elaborate that they took over the more classically known work. These performances would involve hundreds of professionally designed costumes, huge sets designed by architects, large movable props such as boats, water, sun, moon, stars, etc., chariots as floats in the procession, music written specifically for the event by famous musicians (Heinrich Isaac, Alexander Coppinus), and professional dancers who would encourage audience participation. This was also the introduction of the proscenium and the concept of wings which is used in theater productions to this day.

As the Renaissance spread throughout Europe, France and England also incorporated these theatricals into their performances. Eventually the intermezzi, or masque as it came to be known in England, became the entire performance, often drawing such a large crowd that it would be set up and performed outdoors. The name “masque” comes from the masqueraders wearing costumes in the show and procession, not necessarily because they were wearing masks. An entire festival would surround the performance and torchlight procession, hearkening back to the medieval tradition of religious pageants and morality plays. These later period entertainments in the 16th c. are entirely secular in nature, however. The descriptions of these festivals were printed and distributed to the populace, many of which are still available today.

Eventually the masque became a favorite pastime of royalty, including Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth I, both whom loved to participate in courtly theatrics. In these courtly masques, the main parts were played by professional actors and musicians while the miming parts were taken by the courtiers. There are several surviving masques from England in the 15th and into the 16th centuries, many written by the famous playwrights of the day: Ben Jonson, Edmund Spenser, and even William Shakespeare used masque interludes in *The Tempest*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Henry VIII*.

This compilation of music, dance, miming, acting, and singing became so popular that it eventually was fleshed out into full length performances by professionals. In England, Henry Purcell wrote several pieces: *Dido* and

Aeneas, King Arthur, and The Faerie Queen. In Italy, Claudio Monteverdi wrote a similar theatrical piece entitled Orfeo and thus opera was born.

An SCA Masque

As a starting point to introduce this style of theater to my friends and colleagues in the Society, I choose to write upon a topic that we all know and love, our history. Each kingdom of the known world is personified by an appropriately costumed actor. The Light is also the personification of the ideals that spread our game throughout the world. I started the masque with a song and candlelight procession, since our indoor venue would not allow torches. The opening song was Greensleeves, which was sung at the first meeting of the SCA as the participants paraded down the streets of Berkeley. Then each actor stepped forth to spread The Light to the next kingdom in order of their creation. I tried to incorporate serious historical knowledge as well as double entendre and a couple laughs. The actors themselves also came up with some funny bits as we were rehearsing. The masque ends with a piece entitled "Please to See the King" and the dancing of "The Known World Pavane." The song, Please to See the King was rewritten to bolster kingdom pride and support our current royalty (who were in attendance), much as the songs and poems of the intermezzi would have for the Medici family. The Known World Pavane was an obvious choice to me as a dance, given the subject matter of the play.

While I tried to keep the piece short (since we were given 15 minutes to perform) and simple (as I had people who had never acted before,) I also did my best to stay true to the feel of the masque of the Renaissance period and to incorporate as many items as I could that would have been used in period. Each "kingdom" had a heraldic costume, as well as a prop which evoked something of historical significance to the kingdom. We performed the piece at Deadly Carnival last year to a receptive audience. Both the performers and the audience enjoyed themselves and I look forward to writing and performing more masques within the SCA.

Resources:

Jonson, Ben, Ben Jonson's Plays and Masques: Texts of the Plays and Masques, W. W. Norton & Company; Second Edition, 2000

Radice, Mark A., Opera in Context: Essays on Historical Staging from the Late Renaissance to the Time of Puccini, Amadeus Press, 1998

Gurr, Andrew, The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642, Cambridge University Press, 1992

Saslow, James, The Medici Wedding of 1589, Yale University Press, 1996

Lindley, David, The Court Masque, Manchester University Press, 1984

Edwards, Henry Sutherland, History of the Opera, William H. Allen and Co., 1862

Masque Costumes: <http://elizabethancostume.net/masque/index.html>

Festival Books: <http://special-1.bl.uk/treasures/festivalbooks/search.aspx>

A Short History of Masques: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masque>

A Short History of Intermezzi: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intermedio>