

Savile Clarke *Alice* Productions

The Executioner's Chorus

And the Axing of Alice

A Commentary by Matthew Demakos

The Contrarian's Argument Was...

Allow me to amuse you with a contrarian notion. A notion concerning "The Executioner's Chorus" from Walter Slaughter and Henry Savile Clarke's operetta *Alice in Wonderland: A Dream Play for Children*. To wit: the 1888 revival version was conceived *before* the 1886 premiere version. In the premiere's libretto, the first couplet reads:

He is the executioner and thinks it very odd he
Is asked to cut a head off when it hasn't got a body.

In the revival's libretto, however, the first couplet reads:

I am the executioner and think it very odd I
Am asked to cut a head off when it hasn't got a body.¹

The song is referred to as a "Trio & Chorus" in the programs where the King and Queen of Hearts are joined by either Alice (as in 1886) or the Executioner (as in 1888).

There are at least five facts that suggest the later-printed 1888 revival version was actually the original form of the song. First, only the revival version of the song (as shown in figure 2) follows the exact order of Carroll's paragraphs that begin:

The executioner's argument was...
The King's argument was...
The Queen's argument was....²

Clarke was often in the habit, as the librettos show, of adapting Carroll's dialog verbatim from his two Alice books. In fact, Clarke's dialog that precedes the song closely matches that of Car-

roll's original. Second, and related to the above, the lyrics themselves essentially recast the three paragraphs into verse (as shown in the bottom section of figure 2). If the King's couplet restates his position from the book, and if the Queen's couplet restates her position, then it follows that the Executioner's couplet expresses—as it does—his position. (So faithful is Clarke's text that he even presents the parenthetical in the Queen's paragraph as the chorus's wordless moan.) Third, the conductor's score (from the National Library of Australia) which was created during the original run, which began in 1886, uses the 1888 version. This proves that the 1888 "I am the executioner" couplet existed *before* 1888. Fourth, it seems more reasonable that Clarke would want at least two unusual rhymes in the song instead of one. One stands out as awkward. Two declares the rhymes intentionally *warped*. Lastly, in the 1886 versions of the libretto, there is no singer assigned to the first couplet; it is left blank (no Alice, no Executioner, nobody). This shows that the song was in some sort of flux from the get-go.

As it turns out, even in 1888, the issue seems to have been unsettled. The "I am the executioner" verse appears in the libretto yet it is referred to as "He is the executioner" in the programs. Also, in the prompt copy of the libretto,³ that used by the stage hands in 1888, the executioner does not appear in the diagram with the other singers as he should (see figure 1). He only appears upstage (in the back) as one of the four Aces. Yet Alice is down stage (in front) with the others.

Given the above, Clarke likely conceived the song with the Executioner (not Alice) and the two (not one) *offending* Gilbertian rhymes. The blank space in the 1886 libretto and the inconsistencies in the 1888 material suggest that the song may have *always* been in flux. This may be evidence, in fact, that the young actress playing Alice had an option—she could perform the song or not at her whim.

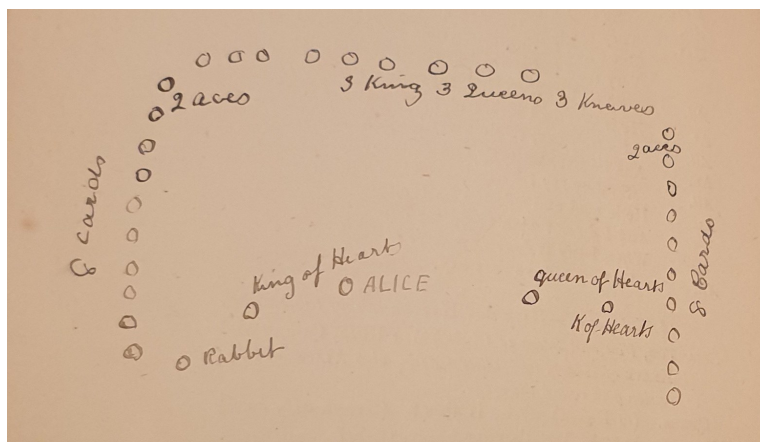


Figure 1: The stage positions of the actors for "The Executioner's Chorus," from the Prompt Copy of the 1888 Libretto. Note the Executioner is not down stage with the other singers despite his singing roll as indicated on the opposite page (not shown). His absence may owe to the old version of the operetta (with Alice) being absentmindedly copied over before the libretto's *sacking* of the girl was noted.

La Musique

The Australian conductor's score uses the 1888 version. This is simple to discern: it contains the "I am the Executioner" lyric and shows two notes given to the voices when "All" are directed to sing. "All" here refers to the three solo singers and not the chorus. In the earlier version the "All" sections were given to Alice (who surely cannot sing more than one note at a time).⁴

The Two Versions of “The Executioner’s Chorus”

The 1886 Original Libretto Version		The 1888 Revival Version	
[A]	[Intro]		[Intro]
[B]	He is the executioner and thinks it very odd he Is asked to cut a head off when it hasn’t got a body.	Ex.	I am the executioner and think it very odd I Am asked to cut a head off when it hasn’t got a body.
[C]	Alice He is the executioner and thinks it very odd he Is asked to cut head off when it hasn’t got a body.	All	He is the executioner and thinks it very odd he Is asked to cut head off when it hasn’t got a body.
[D]	King Of old my executioner indubitably said he’d Be sure a thing that had a head could always be beheaded.	King	Of old my executioner indubitably said he’d Be sure a thing that had a head could always be beheaded.
[E]	Alice Of old his executioner indubitably said he’d Be sure a thing that had a head could always be beheaded.	All	Of old his executioner indubitably said he’d Be sure a thing that had a head could always be beheaded
[F]		[Chrs]	<i>Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!</i>
[G]	Queen With all this idle argument my temper isn’t suited. If something isn’t done at once you’ll all be executed;	Queen	With all this idle argument my temper isn’t suited. If something isn’t done at once you’ll all be executed.
	Alice With all this idle argument her temper isn’t suited. If something isn’t done at once we shall be executed.	All	<i>With all this idle argument her temper isn’t suited. If something isn’t done at once we shall be executed.</i>
[H]		Chrs	<i>Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! All be executed! Ah!</i>
[I]		[Qn?]	<i>Hush! Hush!</i>
[J]		All	<i>He is the executioner and thinks it very odd he Is asked to cut head off when it hasn’t got a body If something isn’t done at once you’ll All be executed!</i>
[K]			[Outro]
[L]			[Possible Instrumental Repeat of J]

The three comparable paragraphs from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* with similarities italicized and colored

The executioner’s argument was, that you couldn’t *cut off a head* unless *there was a body* to cut it off from: that he had never had to do such a thing before, and he wasn’t going to begin at *his* time of life.

The King’s argument was, that *anything that had a head could be beheaded*, and that you weren’t to talk nonsense.

The Queen’s *argument* was, that if *something* wasn’t *done* about it in less than no time she’d have everybody *executed*, all round. (It was this last remark that had made the whole party look so grave and anxious.)

Figure 2: On the left appears the original 1886 libretto version for “The Executioner’s Chorus.” On the right, in roman type (including the colored couplet), appears the libretto version for the 1888 revival. On the right, the roman and italicized text (excluding the colored couplet), represents the Australian score version. On the bottom, appear the three paragraphs Clarke adapted for the song, with the borrowed words italicized and colored. Though the parenthetical in the Queen’s paragraph is not highlighted, it is represented in the worrisome “Ah! Ah!...” sections.

Musically speaking, Clarke and Slaughter may have had two distinct goals. They may have been attempting to write a droll piece of humor, downplaying—with deadpan, nonchalance, monotony—the fact that they were singing about murdering a living being. To play up the horror would have risked scaring the younger children in the audience. Also, Slaughter may have decided to tease the French, given their old habit of decapitating the populace and their more recent habit of accordion playing. In other words, this music, what we now call bal-musette—which heavily uses the squeezebox and waltz time—began to be popular in the 1880s.⁵ The score does emphasize the woodwinds, the section that most imitates the sound of an accordion, and it does cast the words into waltz time (3/4 time) despite the fact that Clarke wrote them in a duple meter. And, as will be discussed below, there may even be a musical reference to the French composer Berlioz.

Section A: The piece begins with a four-bar pizzicato played by the strings. This may be interpreted as the Cheshire Cat coming down from the tree. Pizzicato, a plunking rather than a bowing of the string, is often associated with tiptoeing, and cats, of course, are perceived as perpetually tiptoeing. In Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*, for example, the Cat theme is played by the clarinet but is accompanied by pizzicato strings. That this is simply not absolute, non-

illustrative, music—though it may indeed be—will be supported by our comments in Section I.

Section B: The pizzicato continues as the Executioner declares the oddity of cutting a head from something that lacks a body. The melody spans only a few notes, excepting the last two, and lacks jumps, allowing it to come off as matter-of-fact, nonchalant—as if we are not discussing the slaughtering of a living being.

Section C: Over the same chord sequence, and with the strings playing with their bows, the three singers repeat the Executioner’s sentiment in the third person. The melody, though mostly altered, remains even keeled despite a couple high-note pops by the Queen. With the tripling of sing-

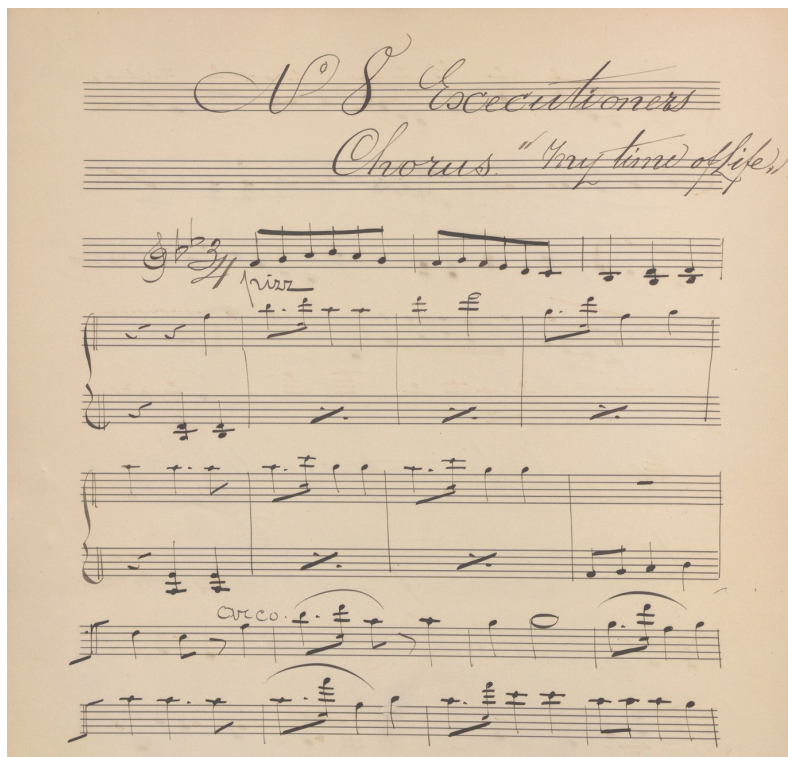


Figure 3: The first page of the concert master’s score for “The Executioner’s Chorus” (detail), from the National Library of Australia. It shows the pizzicato for the Section [A] and [B], and the “arco” marking, the switch to bows, for section [C].

ers and the lengthening of the strings, the section contrasts with the first by sounding fuller, grander.

Section D: With the strings returning to a pizzicato and with a new melody and chord sequence, the King reminisces about his past experiences with executioners. The melody gains interest for being less even; Slaughter cannot prolong the monotony without tiring the listeners. For reasons unknown, Slaughter adds a triangle to the second to fourth measures; the only instance of the instrument in the whole of the piece.

Section E: With the strings returning to their bows, as before, the three singers repeat the King's verse. It is the same melody and essentially the same chord sequence for the first four measures. However, for the second half, the chords diverge and the melody changes as well, becoming even keeled again, stressing the matter-of-factness.

Section F: The chorus enters with a new melody over new chords. Essentially, they sing the same wordless melody three times—a worrisome “ah” (their imagining of being beheaded)—sequencing it downward a whole tone with each rendition. But it is Slaughter's chord sequence that deserves to be mentioned. Starting on Bb, the tune's key, it descends down the circle of fifths eight times, ending on a D chord.⁶ The meaning of this seems to be merely a private piece of fancy; that is, the exercise seems to have no purely artistic reason, one that would affect the audience.

Section G: The Queen now delivers her “*argumentum ad baculum* (or irrelevant appeal to force).”⁷ As a contrast to the previous section and somewhat ironically, her loudmouthing is, at first, sung to pizzicato strings, likely to be played softly. However, when she comes to the word “temper” in the third measure, a timpanist rolls out a rather thunderous forte while the winds play an accented diminished chord (a rather ominous construction). After a few quieter measures, the thunderous timpan and the diminished chord return when she states “you'll all be executed.”

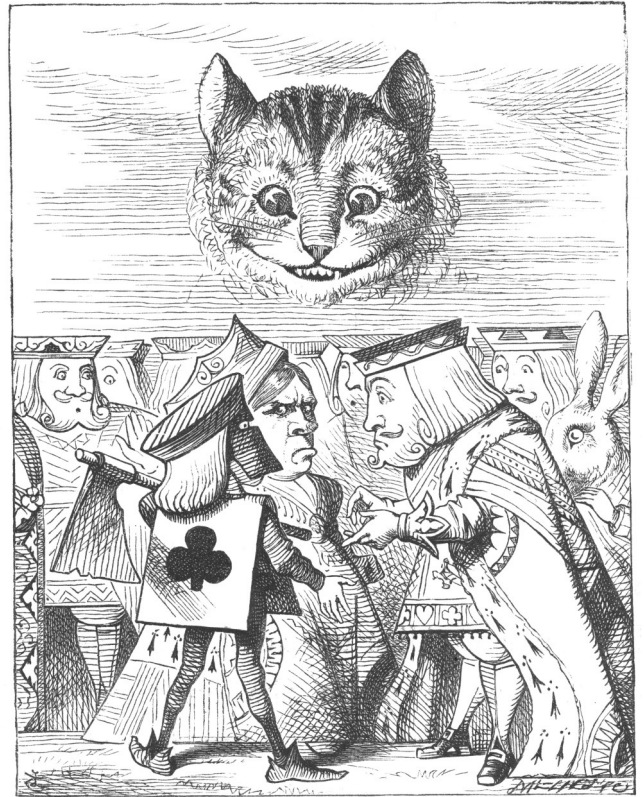


Figure 4: Tenniel's illustration of the scene obviously influenced the production, a concept the audience was likely intended to notice. Note how the staging (see figure 1) places the court cards behind the three *arguing* principles as does Tenniel. This is yet another reason why the first version of “The Executioner's Chorus” was likely the one sans Alice (since Tenniel did not include the girl).

The Lack of Dynamics and the Choices Made

The Conductor's Score (1887) and the printed piano–vocal score (1906) are void of dynamic markings. The part scores, however, give sporadic hints to dynamics, all of which are shown in the chart below. In most cases, these hints are interpreted as full sectional directions, meaning the whole of the orchestra is to play at that marking.

It may appear that I am ignoring the directive in section [F]. However, marking it a full on **forte** in my software sounds a bit harsh. There is a good chance that section [G] (starring the Queen) was meant to be **piano**. It contains horns that are to play a two-note phrase **forte-piano**, meaning **forte** dissolving into a **piano**. This would make little sense if the full section remained **forte**. Section [H] seems as if it should match section [F], and so is given **mezzo-forte** as well.

There are no further markings after section [J] and since it would be ludicrous to end the piece **piano**, I have taken the liberties to make the tag line “If something isn't done at once you'll all be executed” suddenly and dramatically **mezzo-forte**. I have also imagined the penultimate two-bar instrumental phrase **pianissimo** and the final phrase, for dramatic effect, **fortissimo**—after all, there is a timpani roll!

Singer/ Sect.	Part	Part Dynamics	Editor's Dynamics
[A]		—	pp
[B]	Exec.	p (bsn)	p
[C]	All	—	p
[D]	King	p (hrn, cell)	p
[E]	All	—	p
[F]	[Chorus]	f (bsn)	mf (mp winds)
[G]	Queen	—	p (with f crescendos)
[H]	Chorus	—	mf (mp winds)
[I]	“Hush”	f (bsn, hrn)	mf (pp strings)
[J]	All	pp (cl); p (bsn)	p
	[Tag]	—	mf
[K]	[Coda]	—	p; f

Section H: The Queen's threat returns us to the responsive Greek chorus and their worrisome “ah.” Though slightly changed in melodic form, it is again repeated three times but this time ending with the lines “all be executed” before a final two-note “Ah.” Interestingly, Slaughter again has the chords descend down the circle of fifths, as in the previous section. He even begins this section on G, a fifth down from the last chord in the previous chorus section. Thus, apart from the Queen's interruption, the chords descend more than one cycle through the complete circle of fifths! Again, this seems to be a pretention without artistic merit on Slaughter's part. Admittedly, the overall pitches essentially descend throughout the two sections, thus becoming graver and graver. However, this could be accomplished by other means.

Section I: We now come to a rather mysterious section. The upper strings play a pizzicato figure, reminiscent of the introduction despite being somewhat altered. This is accompanied by

Figure 5: The Mysterious Section [I]. The horns play four C notes in octaves (originally accented and marked to play forte), as the upper strings play a pizzicato figure. The meaning is up for interpretation, though a few theories have been advanced.

the two horns, both forte and accented, playing F notes in octaves (see figure 5). Though the strings meander, the horns play the same notes four times. This is interrupted by the word “Hush,” not depicted in the librettos and without a designated singer. Does the chorus sing “hush,” the Queen, the King?

It would be foolish for a production to present this section without the actors reacting to it. They can’t just stand there, can they? In the Opening Chorus, the prompt copy helped us decipher a two-measure forte (where the Caterpillar’s mushroom was brought onto the stage). But here, no such luck, the prompt copy remains mute on the point.

To date, I have imagined three possible scenarios to explain Slaughter’s scoring. In my third scenario—the one that seems most probable—Slaughter is depicting the last passage in the scene related to the Cheshire Cat’s execution, which happens to be the last paragraph in the chapter. Carroll states that after the cat’s head faded away, the “King and the executioner ran wildly up and down looking for it.” Thus, the pizzicato represents the cat sneaking about behind the chorus of characters (à la *Peter and the Wolf* as mentioned in our commentary on Section A) and the first long horn blast represents the King (say) moving from one position to another, gazing broadly, his arms widening. The second horn blast represents the Executioner copying the King’s action, yet in another direction. This, of course, is repeated for a total of four repetitions. Horns, of course, symbolize hunting, which the two “men” are doing, and the sound of the hollow octave symbolizes the fact that nothing is found. Given Clarke and Slaughter’s penchant to represent scenes from the book, this seems as good a scenario as any.⁸

Section J: We return to the trio’s version of the Executioner’s philosophical point of view (Section C), with the harmony and melody slightly altered and mixed from Sections B and C. The repeat signals to the audience that the piece is coming to a close. Unlike the previous trio, however, the strings play the pizzicato version as they did for B. This deliberating softening of

the sonority was likely created to give the coda (the added tag line “If something isn’t done at once, you’ll all be executed!”) a bit of a punch. Thus we have marked it *mf*, being undesignated in the scores. (For more on dynamic choices, see the sidebar on page 6.)

Section K: Slaughter adds a second coda, two five-note phrases that slide stepwise down the scale. The first scored for the clarinets, bassoon and strings (sans bass), and the second played an octave lower, scored for the bassoon, viola, cello, and bass, along with thundering timpani, beginning on F and ending on B-flat. No dynamics appear in the score but it seems wise to play the first phrase *pp* and the second *ff*.

These four bars are reminiscent of the main theme to “The March to the Scaffold,” from the fourth movement of Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* from 1830 (see figure 6). Despite different time signatures, the two share the same key signature, share a two-part downward rhythm, share the same pitch (in the first part), share the same intervals (in the second part), and, of course, the same theme of *beheadedness*. Amusingly, it should be noted, both scenes are not actually taking place; both are derived from dreams. Perhaps it should be specified as well that though Berlioz doesn’t accompany his theme with timpani, his movement does end with a grand timpani tremolo as does Slaughter’s coda.



Figure 6: The Mysterious Section [I]. The horns play four C notes in octaves (originally accented and marked to play forte), as the upper strings play a pizzicato figure. The meaning is up for interpretation, though a few theories have been advanced.

Section L: The librettos state that “All go off to end of song. Queen stops to say to Al[ice]” and the prompt copy states “All dance off leaving Q of Hearts and Alice on.” Though not indicated in the conductor’s score (which is usual), the repeat is marked in most of the part scores, but only as a penciled in after thought. The repeat begins with the first measure “Hush!” and ends on the terminal measure in Section J. Presumably, but not a certainty, neither the trio nor chorus sing, the part being purely instrumental.

The Sentencing

Judging from the ones collected on Lewis Carroll Resources, the reviews did not signal out “The Executioner’s Chorus” as a high point in the production. To be fair, this should not be seen as a critique of the music or scene. If I may make a personal statement, however, I do not

believe the tune would make one of my top ten numbers. Though I tried to *excite* the dynamics to give it some life (see the sidebar), as a whole the composition is a tad insipid to my ear—though partly an intention by its creator. In order to make the whole something special, it seems to need some admirable, memorable, comedic or compelling staging.

The reviewers did signal out some of the performers, however. H. H. H. Cameron (the famous photographer’s son) was called “a fearsome Executioner.”⁹ That’s the type of Executioner I want to see. Though he is merely in the background during the song, the Cheshire Cat received the most praise of all the actors in the operetta, children and adults. He was played by the thirteen-year-old Charles Adeson (see figure 7). “Never was there such a droll cat as this.” “... a part which is capitally played.” “One of the best played parts in the piece.”¹⁰ His elder brother, Stephen, played the King of Hearts and received kind notices. The Queen of Hearts is another matter. One keen theater critic did not find her amusing and argued that she should be replaced, an occurrence that only took place—to his chagrin—during the revival. This reviewer wished to remain anonymous.¹¹



Figure 7: Charles Adeson as the Cheshire Cat (D. Abrahams as the White Rabbit), from *St. Nicholas Illustrated*, January 1888.

Notes

1. Henry Savile Clarke, *Alice in Wonderland: A Dream Play for Children* [libretto] (London: The Court Circular, 1886), p. 21; *ibid* (London: The Court Circular, 1888), p. 19.
2. Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Macmillan, 1886), pp. 127–8.
3. Clarke, *Alice in Wonderland: A Dream Play for Children* [prompt copy], 1888, Richards Collection. This is a special version of the 1888 libretto with printing on the recto only, leaving all versos blank. It contains handwritten notes on readying actors, entrance locations, music cues, lighting, curtains and backdrops, and other matters to run a smooth performance.
4. Though one could reconstruct the 1886 version, it would be, more or less, a reduction and, according to at least one analyst, an inferior version. Since the singer of the first verse is unknown, either the King or Queen, there is only a fifty percent chance that the reconstruction would be accurate. The piano-vocal score from 1906 gives the first verse to the Queen (“He is the executioner...”) but otherwise follows the Australian conductor’s score.
5. Admittedly, it may be too early to associate the French with this type of music at this time.
6. For those more musically inclined, the seventh is added on the third beat for all but two of the chords in the sequence.

7. Peter Heath, *The Philosopher's Alice* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974), p. 84.
8. In my first scenario, the pizzicato likewise represented the pizzicating while the horn blasts represented the Queen's turning of her head in search of the creature. She turns her head and torso slowly one way for one complete horn blast, then turns her head and torso slowly another way, etc., for four horn blasts. In my third scenario, the Executioner is substituted for the Queen.

By the way, the Cheshire Cat did prance about the stage in several scenes. In fact, the thirteen

year old who played the part, Charles Adeson, was highly praised for his feline skills. "We have a pussy at home, you see." He told an interviewer, "I watched her carefully to notice her antics, and I endeavour to copy those."

9. *The Court Circular*, January 1, 1887, p. 4.
10. *The Nottingham Evening Post*, December 27, 1886, p. 2; *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 3, 1887, p. 25.
11. Why are you looking here? I said "anonymous"!

