

Savile Clarke *Alice* Productions

The Music for the Opening Chorus in the 1886 *Alice* Operetta

(and the Entrance of the White Rabbit)

A Commentary by Matthew Demakos

Alice's Eyes: An Open and Shut Case

“The curtain raises upon the heroine Alice—dressed in a white satin frock and white stockings—asleep in a chair—a book in her hand—under a large tree with wide-spreading branches—in an exquisite woodland scene—a forest in autumn—with fairies—[in] white satin and silver trimmings—dancing round her—dancing in elfish glee.”

Such is how the operetta *Alice in Wonderland: A Dream Play for Children* opened in the original 1886 production, if we fuse together a few reviews.¹ Some of these descriptions are evidently influenced by the libretto which states “Forest in Autum. Alice asleep at foot of tree and Fairies dancing round her.” The libretto follows these brief words with the “Chorus of Fairies,” an eight-line verse written by the operetta’s librettist, Henry Savile Clarke. Though the verse appears only once in the libretto, we know from the 1906 piano-vocal score (and the handwritten score in the National Library of Australia) that it was repeated. Nonetheless, the lyric is followed by a long description where, after the fairies “troop off,” we find ourselves in the “Wonderland, Garden set,” complete with a mushroom, Caterpillar, and an Alice who “wakes up.”

The oddity is that the book has Alice AWAKE–SLEEP–DREAM, as so happens in real life, whereas the operetta has Alice: SLEEP–AWAKE–DREAM, which is a challenge to our good senses. Clarke was certainly aware of the reversal and his *ironic* use of the word “wake”; he wrote the concepts into the last two lines

¹ For the reviews, please use the search facility on the Articles/Reviews page on *Lewis Carroll Resources* and enter the quotation to find the source publication. See <https://lewis Carroll resources.net/savileclarke/reviews.html>.

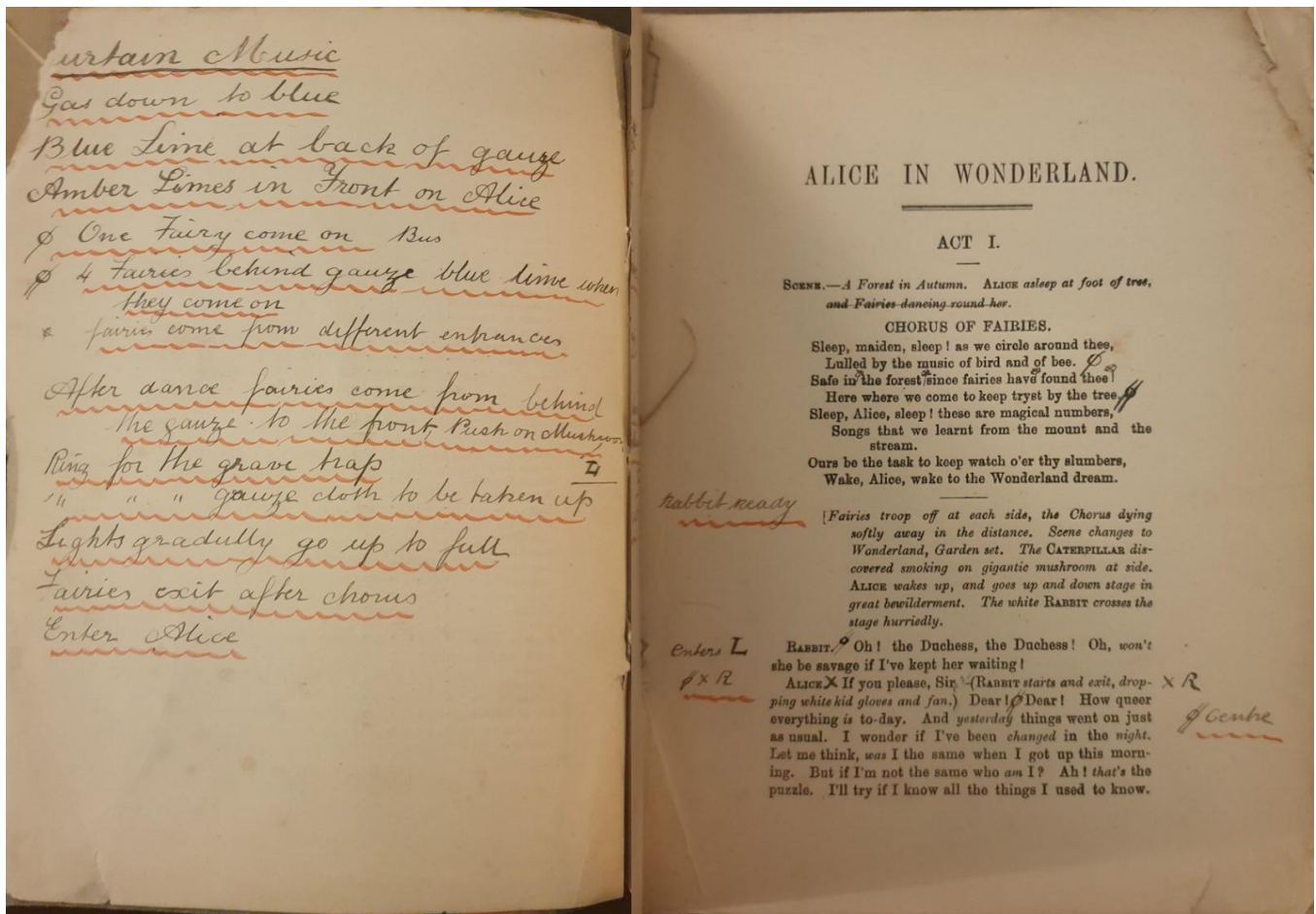


Figure 1. Opening Scene, Prompt Copy of the 1888 Libretto (from the Richards Collection). The handwritten directions written into a special copy of the 1888 libretto used by the stagehands. As can be seen, Alice is not mentioned as exiting but later enters, which must be a re-appearance. When and how did she exit? Also note the crossed-out words “and Fairies dancing round her,” indicating a change in the 1888 production from the original libretto.

of the chorus: “Ours be the task to keep watch o’er thy slumbers, / Wake, Alice, wake to the Wonderland dream.”

Despite the description in the libretto, there are two pieces of evidence that suggest Alice did not actually wake up, or open her eyes, in front of the audience. The first is the reviewer for *The Leamington Spa Courier* who wrote that Alice “disappears and enters again”² during this scene. Note the reviewer’s use of the word *disappears*, rather than *exits*. The second is the 1888 prompt copy of the libretto in the Richards Collection (see Figure 3). It contains a long list of directives for the stage hands to carry out during the scene. Near the top appears the line “Amber Limes in Front of Alice” and at the very end appears the line “Enter Alice.”

² *The Leamington Spa Courier*, May 21, 1887, p. 2.

This is quite the quandary; it mentions her immediate *presence* and—without the mention of an exit—her *entry*. How and when did she make her exodus? The answer perhaps lies in the middle of the prompt copy’s long list of directives, namely where the stage hands are instructed to “Ring for the grave trap.” This is a trap door in the middle of the stage (so named for a scene in *Hamlet*). Presumably, in the 1888 revival and in the original run (as evidenced by the *Leamington* reviewer), Alice made her exit through the trap.

This APPEARANCE–DEPARTURE–RETURN was likely thought to be dramatically necessary. Despite the explanation in the line “Wake, Alice, wake to the Wonderland dream,” it may have been too confusing for the audience to actually *see* Alice “wake” when she is in fact dreaming. Hence, despite his working the oddity into his lyrics, Clarke may have seen the necessity—through rehearsals, perhaps—to have Alice disappear *unseen*, without any musical or lighting accompaniment. As such, she re-appears as a dreaming, yet seemingly awake Alice.

Slaughter’s Score: A Mystery Solved... Maybe

The music for the scene by the operetta’s composer, Walter Slaughter, is divided into eleven sections (numbered with rehearsal marks A through K in the accompanying music video). The overall key is A-flat major, which is the same key as the act’s finale. Curiously, the second act’s Opening Chorus and Finale (either the original or the 1888 replacement) are in A major. There stands a chance—given composers’ propensity to play with note letter names—that the two keys were influenced by the heroine’s name.³

Presented here is the first version of how the operetta opened, the one Lewis Carroll would have heard. It does not include a full-on overture. That would not be composed until 1900 when Slaughter expanded the operetta for a new production. Interestingly, his new overture was not included in the printed 1906 piano-vocal score. This is likely due to the fact that the publishers based their score on the Conductor’s Score (which is in piano-vocal style) and the overture in the Conductor’s Score used only a one-note melody staff for several of the overture’s sections. The publishers were either not supplied with the part scores or were too cheap to pay for an arranger.⁴

³ These are called musical cryptograms. Simon Jeffes, for example, wrote a piece called “Cage Dead,” in honor of the composer John Cage, where the melody follows the order of the letters in the title.

⁴ Several changes have been made in the scores by the editor, especially in dynamics. However, the scores also contain the original markings for musical directors to make their own decisions.

Section A: This section is what the prompt copy names “Curtain Music.” The violins play a tremolo against a melody in the flute, oboe, and viola. Though it begins in the key of A-flat, it shifts through several enharmonic chords and ends with an E-flat. This foreign yet comfortable termination shifts, however...



Figure 2. Phoebe Carlo as Alice, asleep (original 1886 production); left – *The Sphere*, 22 December 1900, above - *St. Nicholas Illustrated*, January 1888. Was Alice in a chair under a tree, or on a protrusion or stump at its base? Many reviewers mention a chair; many others simply state “asleep under a tree” and only the *Liverpool Daily Post* (12 April 1887) “a stump.”

Section B: ... to an E-flat minor, seemingly, at the moment Alice is revealed sleeping in her chair, the curtain having been pulled. Being born from its major counterpart, the minor chord draws more attention to the new mood—solemn, serious, important—than it would have been otherwise. The bassoon, which plays in unison with the cellos, is directed to play “dolce” (sweetly, adoringly). Though an innocent, lone word in the middle of a page of strewn musical notes, it is an obvious reference to the now-seen child, who, sleeping, no less, must be adored. The low register of the two instruments effectuates the sweetness, giving the scene a sympathetic *aww*, not possible for instruments in higher registers to effect.

The section ends with a downward melody that is marked to be played in a crescendo despite already beginning on a forte. The direction and increasing volume—along with the diminished chord in the shimmering upper strings—suggests the fairies are creeping up on the sleeping Alice... and with dubious intentions. The composer is playing *us*, however.

Section C: The fairies change their mood from foul to friendly, Slaughter having tricked us with a semi-false crescendo. They begin to quietly sing “an extremely taking bit of musical composition,”⁵ as one reviewer stated. They inform the sleeping Alice that she is “Safe in the forest since fairies have found thee” and that they will “keep watch o’er thy slumbers.” Since the fairies were described as “not any older than Alice,”⁶ it is possible that the voices were supplied solely by the children (though the adult actors may have been singing offstage).

Notably, the section features a harp. The instrument was rarely used in operetta scores at the time⁷ and so its appearance in the *Dream Play* must have special significance. Slaughter naturally chose the instrument for its association with dreams and fairies (especially *traditional* fairies as in the operetta version of the story).⁸ With its tingly high register and its flight-like use of swirling arpeggios, the harp effortlessly transcribes the visual twinkling and flitty nature of fairies into an aural language. Beginning with eight measures of unassuming plucked chords, the part transitions to four measures of sixteenth note arpeggios and finally to four measures of rather impressive thirty-second-note arpeggios. After this tour de force, the harp is featured as well in the four-measure coda, even having an unaccompanied flourish.⁹

Section D: This is followed by an allegro where the strings hold a pleasant yet anxious A-flat major chord in tremolo for twelve measures. The chorus sings “Alice” and a lone horn echoes the melody back in a double forte. The two-note melody, a downward perfect fifth, an interval associated with horns—which itself is an instrument associated with nature—give the whole an outdoorsy flavor, not to mention the environmental-like echo effect. After the fairies and horns repeat the melody, the chorus sings “Wake to the Wonderland dream.”¹⁰

The fairies are trying to awaken Alice—in a gentle manner—by softly calling out her name. The tremolo in the strings adds a touch of anticipation—will she wake or will she not? As it turns out, the answer is *not*, and the fairies quickly resort to other means.

⁵ *Reynold's Newspaper*, December 30, 1888, p. 5.

⁶ Elizabeth Robins Parnell, London Christmas Pantomimes, *St Nicholas* 15, January 1888, pp. 180–9.

⁷ Private email, Robin Gordon-Powell to the author, March 22, 2024. Possibly, Slaughter had to fight for the harp, as it would be paid for by the producer. That it only appears in the beginning and end of each act may show some compromise was agreed upon.

⁸ See Deirdre Loughridge, *Haydn's Sunrise, Beethoven's Shadow: Audiovisual Culture and the Emergence of Musical Romanticism* (New York: The University of Chicago, 2016); and Robert Gjerkingen, *Music in the Galant Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁹ The first four chords of the chorus (Ab–Fm–Bbm7–Eb7) are a familiar chord progression, a version of the popular doo-wop progression, used in such songs as the Beatles’ “You’re Going To Lose That Girl” and “I will,” and in Chrystal Gale’s “Don’t It Make My Brow Eyes Blue,” and the “Flintstones Theme.”

¹⁰ The words in this section are not presented in the libretto per se, being mere repeated words from the verses proper.

Section E: In a jarring double forte, the orchestra (rather than the lone horn) echoes the melody of “Wake to the Wonderland dream.” This is followed by five measures of a brash, pulsating chord from the whole of the orchestra, an A-natural diminished seventh chord, made all the more deafening from a thundering timpan.

The fairies are trying to awaken Alice—in a rude manner—by being boisterously loud. Perhaps the fairies were supplied with prop musical instruments to blow into Alice’s face (or pretended their wands were horns) and the whole affair was played comically. The fermata on the rest which ends the chord—creating a longer than expected length of silence—suggests that the fairies took a beat, leaned back, and stared upon the girl to see if their brashness had the anticipated effect.

Slaughter was generous enough to supply the sprites with a chord that was not only inherently dissonant but also associated with the fairies’ eerie world. Berlioz used the diminished seventh chord, for example, in “Dream of a Night of the Sabbath” (from *Symphonie Fantastique*) where the protagonist finds himself “in the middle of a horrible troop of ghosts, sorcerers, and monsters of all kinds gathered together for his funeral.” And Stravinsky will use it in *The Rite of Spring* for depictions of sacrificial dances and pagan rituals. Nevertheless...

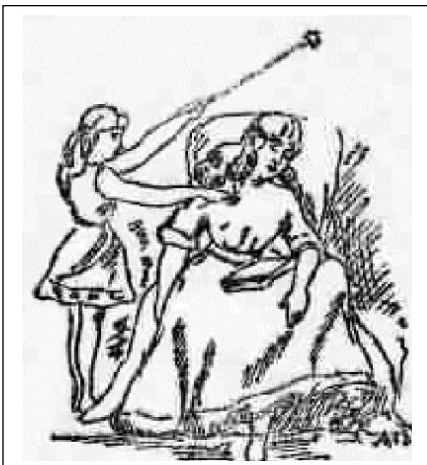


Figure 3. Sketch of Alice asleep, a fairy trying to awaken her. From *The Cardiff Times*, 14 May, 1887.

Section F-G-H: Alice remains sleeping and so... the fairies dance. They step to a rhythmic piccolo melody in a vivace, a tempo marking between allegro and presto. The marking means “brisk” or “lively” and is related to the English word “vivacious.” The dance is in the form ABA (which corresponds to our F-G-H sections). To contrast with the rapid sixteenth and thirty-second notes played by the pipping piccolo, Slaughter gives the middle part to the oboe and with a two-measure melody that begins with a long-held note. This is sequenced up a third higher after which it is taken up by a clarinet. Personally, this dance is the highlight of the “Opening Scene” and, lasting only thirty seconds, deserves to be extended to the form ABABA.

Rather than the harp, the section features a triangle to give the dance a dreamlike eeriness. Aurally, the instrument has a *tingly* aspect which complements the visual *sparkling* aspect of our all-white fairies themselves.

It is tempting to interpret the dance as a third attempt to awaken the poor girl. One fairy may be poking Alice in the shoulder or ribs, say, to the punchy eighth notes on beats one and two in the first two measures and shaking her along with the quick sixteenth notes in the third, for example. If so, this would have been played for laughs as well. Though, this seems an overreach in musical interpretation.¹¹

Section I: After the dance, there is a sudden change in mood of unknown significance, a four-measure “Andante” in 4/4 time. It consists of the complete brass section, blaring out five chords accompanied by tremolo timpani. It is regal in nature, as if some grand personage is making an entrance; it suggests that we must stop, stand straight, and show respect.

What could this music represent? Given that it is played by the brass section, which is associated with royalty, perhaps it represents the appearance of a throne—otherwise known as the Caterpillar’s large mushroom. At about this point in the scene, the stage directions list “fairies... Push on Mushroom.” Is our Caterpillar some grand elf?

Section J: Next the chorus repeats the verses but without the coda. It is likely that during this repeat Alice exits through the “grave trap.” Perhaps her exit was done surreptitiously, as argued above, with the fairies and the mushroom blocking the audience’s view. If so, the darkness helped hide her exit as well, as the “lights gradually go up to full” only afterwards.¹²

Section K: Rather than the “Wake to the Wonderland Dream” coda, the cellos and a bassoon play an arching melody over tremolo strings voicing an A-flat major chord, the key of the piece, giving the whole a safe, pleasing ending. This section is referred to in the libretto: “Fairies troop off at each side, the Chorus dying softly away in the distance.”

¹¹ In the part scores, both the flute and the violas have alternate versions for the chorus sections. The variation in the oboe is virtually the same as the vocal melody and thus may be a guide to more inexperienced singers (likely all children). The variation in the flute may be a response to the variation in the oboe, or, since some of the measures imitate the harp, may be an alternative version if the harpist was unavailable.

¹² The 1906 Conductor’s Score, used for the Australian all-children production of that year, has this section marked to repeat. The pencil notation to repeat the section in our 1900 Conductor’s Score (used for the Australian 1901 production) is, no doubt, their marking. Thus, it is not performed in our rendition. They also only played the last A part of the dance (our section H).

“Entrance of White Rabbit”: The libretto states that “Alice wakes up, and goes up and down stage in great bewilderment.” She is now in the “Wonderland, Garden set.” The music that accompanies the White Rabbit’s entrance is apropos of his character, jittery and flitty. Slaughter accomplishes this with a melody that begins with eight alternating half-step notes (the jittery part) and concludes with a downward scalar descent (the flitty part). This is sequenced down a fifth and repeated. After sequencing it down another fifth, the melody takes two bars before repeating the whole and concluding. Thus, if the White Rabbit is *dancing* to the music, he jitters in one place then flits to another only to jitter again for a total of six repetitions. According to the prompt copy, from the audience’s point of view, he enters right and exits left (in case you needed to know).

Alice’s Eyes: A Shut and Open Case

And if the audience did not see a sleeping Alice *wake* (that is, open her eyes) *to the Wonderland dream* in the beginning of the play, did they see Alice fall asleep (close her eyes) at the end of the play? As it turns out, the fairies, in their white satin and silver trimmings, return to the stage for the concluding scene. With voices raised a half tone (to the key of A major) and with a slightly different arrangement, they sing new words to their old melody:

Wake! Alice! wake! Now no longer a rover,
Fast fade the Wonderland visions away;
Wake at the Elves’ call—the dream-play is over
Wake! Alice! wake! To the world of to-day.

As stated in the libretto, “Alice” is “discovered at foot of tree asleep as in first Act.” The operative word is *discovered*, a word that clearly means that the audience *never* saw her close her eyes and drift away. Again, this curiosity, this reversal of the natural order of things, was deliberately hidden from the audience. It is only now, with her eyes closed, that the audience witnesses a change in her consciousness—“Slow music, she wakes and rubs her eyes.” “Oh, I’ve had such a curious dream!”¹³

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¹³ The 1888 prompt copy has a long list of directives for this scene. “After Cello Solo pull for grave trap Alice ascends slowly” appears in the middle (lacking punctuation). The word “slowly” implies that the audience sees her walking up the steps and with her eyes open, as the “fairies exit” and the “lights go gradually up.” However, this interpretation is in direct conflict with the printed libretto. Therefore, the word “slowly” may just be a warning to the light operators that she will move stealthily (as it is dark) and not to put the lights up too early. Also, it seems dramatically clunky to have Alice ascend from a “rabbit hole” she never went down in the first place, and to have her *not* awake, *not* to open her eyes, in full view of the audience.