

# The libretto in brief

Traduzione di Rodney Stringer

## Act One

*Village of Burglen, in the Uri Canton.*

The people are jubilant, the peasants preparing garlands while a fisherman sings a song. Only William Tell stands to one side, meditating plans of revolt against the oppressor, while his wife Hedwige and his son Jemmy are busy with their rustic labours. Enter Melcthal, who has to celebrate the marriage of three couples of shepherds. He urges the folk to resume their singing and exhorts his son Arnold to consider the joys of marriage. Arnold meditates upon his father's words. He is torn between his love for Mathilde, the Austrian princess whom he saved from an avalanche, and that of his country. William notices Arnold's troubled mind and incites him to struggle against the oppressor. The nuptial celebrations have begun again, with singing and dancing. Melcthal blesses the bridal pair. Meanwhile, in the distance can be heard the sound of hunting horns. Gesler and his followers are pursuing someone. The festivity is abruptly interrupted by the arrival of Leutold, who displays a bloodstained axe and asks for protection from the peasants. He has killed a soldier who had raped his daughter and now he is being chased by the Austrians. The fisherman refuses to ferry him across the river, so William carries him safely to the other side, thus rescuing him from the revenge of the soldiers captained by Rudolf, who threaten to burn the village to the ground and slaughter its inhabitants. Melcthal is taken hostage.

## Act Two

*The heights of Riitli. In the distance can be glimpsed the Lake of the Four Cantons. Night has fallen.*

The hunters return to the village, while the shepherds' song echoes in the distance. Enter Mathilde, hoping to see Arnold again, who is not long in arriving. After a brief amorous preamble, Mathilde exhorts Arnold to become a follower of Gesler; only thus will they be able to be married without too many difficulties. Disturbed by the sudden entry of William and Walter, Mathilde flees. Arnold confesses his love of Mathilde, despite the remonstrances of William and Walter, the two men reveal to him finally that Gesler has had Melcthal killed. Shaken by this news, Arnold resolves to join Walter and William in their struggle against the oppressor. In the meantime, the inhabitants of the cantons Unterwalden, Schwitz and Uri come in, by twos and threes. Urged by William, all those present solemnly swear to fight the enemy. It is dawn.

## Act Three

Scene one.

*Interior of an old ruined chapel.*

Arnold reveals to Mathilde his decision to fight for his country. The two bid one another farewell forever. Meanwhile can be heard the echoes of a distant festivity which Gesler has ordered to take place on that day, in the village of Altdorf.

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Scene two.

*The square at Altdorf.*

In the middle of the square a trophy of arms has been erected, surmounted by Gesler's cap, to which the people are obliged to pay homage. The festivity continues. Gesler's men however provoke general indignation by forcing the local women to take part in the dancing. William and Jemmy refuse to kneel in front of the trophy and are accordingly dragged before Gesler. Tell is accused of complicity in the escape of Leutold and is arrested, but first he orders Jemmy to light a fire on the mountain, as a signal of revolt to the conspirators. Jemmy is held back by the guards. If William wishes to save himself and his son's life, he must hit with an arrow an apple placed on Jemmy's head. William is perplexed and hesitates, but Jemmy spurs him to face the ordeal. William blesses his son and exhorts him to stand motionless. He then takes aim and hits the apple. The people exult. William faints with joy and from his jerkin falls a second arrow which he had hidden there. Gesler demands an explanation and William confesses that he would have used it to kill him had he missed his target. Gesler has William arrested and condemned to death. In the meantime Mathilde has arrived with her retinue and decides to take Jemmy into her protection. The soldiers drag William away in chains, while the people curse Gesler.

#### **Act Four**

Scene one.

*In front of Melcthal's house.*

In his father's house, Arnold contemplates revenging the murder of Melcthal and plans to free William. Meanwhile he thinks bitterly of the happy days now over. Enter the peasants, who want to free William. Arnold reveals to them the place where the arms are hidden.

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Scene two.

*Near the Lake of the Four Cantons.*

Mathilde returns Jemmy to his mother and offers herself as a hostage in return for William's freedom. Jemmy sets fire to William's house as the signal of revolt. Hedwige and the women pray for William's life. Enter Leutold, who says he has seen a boat carrying Gesler and the prisoner William. The lake is lashed by a dreadful storm. William succeeds in bringing the craft to the shore and leaps onto a rock, while pushing the boat back into the lake, with Gesler and the soldiers in it. Gesler's boat sinks, but the tyrant attempts to swim ashore. William pierces him with an arrow. The storm dies away. Arnold, Walter and the armed peasants bring news that Altdorf has been conquered. Switzerland is free. The people rejoice. The storm has finally abated and the sun is shining once again.