



# Jonathan Dove

## *Tobias and the Angel*

Church opera in one act  
Libretto by David Lan

The story of *Tobias and the Angel* begins with blindness and demon-possession, continues with a journey across the mountains in the company of a mysterious guide and ends with healing and revelations: a woman is cured of her possession, a man's sight is restored, and the mysterious guide reveals himself to be an angel.

In many ways the story invites music. When I first read it, I immediately wondered, "What would it *sound* like to have your sight restored?" In a way I wrote the piece to find out. I was invited to tell this story as an opera by the Reverend Simon Mackenzie. He wanted to commemorate a friend, Nicholas John, who died in a mountaineering accident. He envisaged it as a work with community involvement, to be performed in his church – St Matthew's Perry Beeches in Birmingham.

The first performances all took place in churches – the original Almeida Opera production in Islington in 1999; the subsequent Birmingham production; and the Young Vic/English Touring Opera tour beginning in St John's, Waterloo. It was only with the re-opening of the Young Vic in 2006 that *Tobias and the Angel* was performed in a theatre, where it works extremely well. As part of the Apocrypha but not part of the Hebrew bible, the tale has a mystical aspect but also has the character of a Jewish folk-tale, especially the scene in which Tobias is threatened by a huge fish, kills it and is instructed to take its heart and gall – which turn out to have magical healing properties. This folk character is reflected in the instrumentation, which includes typical klezmer instruments – accordion, clarinet, fiddle and bass.

I sensed that this would be the perfect story for playwright David Lan. He shaped a libretto which opens up plentiful opportunities for communal story-telling, including a musical expression of Tobias' inner journey – he has to learn to hear the song of the trees, of the river and of the mountains. There are roles for adults (both on and off stage) and children in the communities of Nineveh and Ecbatana, the sparrows, the big fish, trees, river and mountains, and finally angels.

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