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Review/Opera

A 'Médée' That Turns Antiquity Into Life

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

When Médée calls upon the evil phantoms of the underworld to serve her will in Marc-Antoine Charpentier's opera, when she slowly allows a magical cloak to release its poison and watches her romantic rival writhe in agony and when she declares that she has even murdered her own children in her desire to wreak revenge on her faithful husband, Charpentier doesn't raise his voice. He doesn't abandon the dance forms and gracious manners of French Baroque opera. The singing doesn't explode in Lucia-like extravagance. The remarkable expressions are contained, strained; the sense comes through subtle shifts of texture, and through the clearly articulated French text, which is almost always set with one note for each syllable.

But by now, William Christie and his early-music group, Les Arts Florissants, have shown us how large a universe of emotion lies compressed in his musical style, how a supple sense of pulse governs these declamations, how violence, jealousy and tenderness can be revealed in the ways in which lines are sung and text pronounced. And that is exactly what was accomplished in the much-awaited production of "Médée" that Mr. Christie conducted at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Thursday night; an antique language was turned to a living tongue, its every nuance brought to life.

That was clear in the orchestra's playing, but also in the impressive performance by Lorraine Hunt as Médée. Ms. Hunt has sung Handel on recordings with elegance and insight. Here, as part of a remarkable cast noteworthy less for the intrinsic quality of its voices than for its interpretive imagination and beauty of phrasing, she stood out as both a character and an artist; her voice is large, but it is used with great skill, giving each sense as well as shape. In an opera filled with weak, duplicitous men, she became a fierce, unflinching figure of considerable presence.

This production, which will be seen again tonight and tomorrow afternoon, is a fitting sequel to the haunting staging of Lully's "Atys" that Mr. Christie brought to the Academy in 1989 and 1992, which was created by essentially the same production team, led by Jean-Marie Villégier. As in "Atys," Mr. Villégier drained the opera of its scenic references to the natural world. The entire drama occurs in a nearly closed-in space, a tall, domed, black room with rough wooden floors, and ceilings decorated with mythic images. That space, designed by Carlo Tommasi, changes only in the bands of seating arrayed around its center; a bit too obviously, perhaps, it begins with church pews and ends with open coffins.

Médée arrives in Corinth with Jason, who bewitches her by falling in love with Créuse, the local princess; Médée then takes her revenge, not just on the lovers, but also on the rulers who were supposedly allied in her defense. As in Mr. Villégier's "Atys," the inhabitants of this world resemble



Michel Szabo/"Médée"

Noémi Rime, left, Agnès Mellon, kneeling, and Lorraine Hunt in "Médée."

the nobility of Louis XIV's court, where this opera was first performed; Patrice Cauchetier's costumes are varieties of court attire. Mr. Villégier also responded very closely to Mr. Christie's

Médée

Opera with a prologue in five acts by Marc-Antoine Charpentier, libretto by Thomas Corneille; conductor, William Christie, assisted by Elisabeth Matiffa and Emmanuelle Haïm; directed by Jean-Marie Villégier, assisted by Christophe Galland and Jonathan Duverger; director for the 1994 revival, Christophe Galland; sets by Carlo Tommasi; costumes by Patrice Cauchetier; lighting by Bruno Boyer; dancers, Compagnie Fêtes Galantes. Performed by Les Arts Florissants at the Brooklyn Academy of Music Opera House, 30 Lafayette Avenue at Ashland Place, Fort Greene.

Médée.....	Lorraine Hunt
Jason.....	Mark Padmore
Créon.....	Bernard Deletré
Créuse.....	Agnès Mellon
Oronte.....	Jean-Marie Salzmänn
Nérine.....	Noémi Rime
Cléone.....	Isabelle Desrochers

musical style: the characters dance and move and sing and carefully shape their expressions in ways we associate with the period in which the opera was first performed. We experience "Médée" as it might have seemed to the Sun King: as a drama about courtly manners and diplomacy undone by passion and madness.

The production sets up its own circumscribed world within which small details take on large significance. (Even the supertitles were intelligent.) Béatrice Massin's choreography creates a visual language that is the counterpart of Charpentier's musical one; extremes of emotion are expressed within a formal structure. I didn't agree with Mr. Villégier's radical transformation of the Prologue to the opera. He deliberately ignored the words and created a baptism scene in a church. (The Prologue's references to love, constancy and victory have far more to do with the opera's themes than Mr. Villégier noted.) There were longueurs during the course of the four and a half hours as well.

But Mr. Christie's approach to this score was, once again, a revelation; he has widened the range of the work compared with his 1985 recording. Two casts will be alternating performances until Sunday. The cast I saw included Mark Padmore as Jason, Bernard Deletré as Créon, Agnès Mellon as Créuse and Jean-Marc Salzmänn as Oronte. They had clearly been submersed in Mr. Christie's musical universe, in which the text and the music can seem different aspects of a single expression.

In March 1995, in honor of the 500th anniversary of Purcell's death, Mr. Christie will conduct a concert version of "King Arthur" as part of a week's concerts with Les Arts Florissants at the academy. Discussions are continuing for another staged opera, though that will be an expensive enterprise. "Médée" was a co-production of three French companies. Now, with its inclusion in Mr. Christie's vision of the French Baroque, our universe seems larger.