

Charpentier: Actéon - Les arts florissants (2004)



Actéon, pastorale for chorus, strings & continuo, H 481 - Ouverture - Choeur des Chasseurs - Air d'Actéon - Duo de Chasseurs Actéon: Paul Crémazy Diane: Karen Perret Junon: Sophie Van de Woestyn Hyale: Martinez Gil Paz Artébuse: Maria Ogueta Daphné: Anne-Lise Faucon Chasseurs: Guillaume Michel / Nicholas Achten

Les arts florissants, idylle en musique, H 487

La musique: Leticia Giuffredi Peinture: Julien Picard Poésie: Olga Listova Architecture: Madjouline Zerari Discorde: Hugo Oliveira La Paix: Eugénie Warnier Un Guerrier: Benjamin Alunni Orchestre de l'Académie Baroque Européenne d'Ambronay Conducted by Christophe Rousset en la Chapelle Royale du Château de Versailles Enregistré a l'Opéra Royale 2004

Within the last few years Marc-Antoine Charpentier has become the most recorded French composer of the Grand Siècle. Paradoxically, he has remained a rather elusive figure and this 'forgotten French Composer' whom Claude Crussard rediscovered in 1945 scarcely emerges from the realm of 'lyrical shades'. This resurrection of Charpentier continues to surprise us even now. His work, which touches on so many different domains, seems to have survived virtually intact in the celebrated manuscripts found in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. But the history of these works has yet to be uncovered. In fact, apart from a few rare monuments like the *Médée* or *David et Jonathas*, these works now being rescued from oblivion are difficult to situate either in time or place.

Charpentier's career is linked to three main places: between 1679-1680 he was responsible for the sacred music of the Dauphin and for the music of the Princess de Guise. In 1684 he entered the service of the Jesuits of Rue St. Antoine. When did he write *Actéon*? We know that certain works of this kind were written to entertain the Princess de Guise, such as the musical idyll, *Les Arts Florissants* which is scored for the instrumental ensemble maintained by this noble personage (two treble viols, harpsichord and bass viol). Upon examination of the score there is no immediate reason to reject the idea that *Actéon* was written for the Princess. However certain elements suggest other possibilities: e.g. the *Plainte* in the fourth scene mentions 'no

flutes' – and yet one can easily imagine two supplementary flutes in the Princess' ensemble.

Nonetheless, one must continue to assume it was written for a small ensemble. Thus, in the chorus of hunters, 'Quelle ardeur du soleil', we find small differences in the harpsichord and the viol parts: 'the small notes are for the viol, the large ones for the harpsichord.' This mention of the harpsichord confirms that Actéon was originally intended for a small band. It is this kind of band that the Music Master recommends to Monsieur Jourdain, who aspires to become like 'the folk of quality', in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*: 'You will need three voices, a soprano, a countertenor and a bass who will be accompanied by a bass viol, a theorbo and a harpsichord for the basso continuo, with two treble violins to play the ritornelli.'

Even so, the dramatic dimensions of Actéon make it a work that exceeds the limits of a 'private' musical establishment. The performance by the ensemble Les Arts Florissants is aimed at a larger audience such as that of the Jesuit College. However, the ensemble avoids all pretensions to larger vocal and instrumental forces. Even the choruses are composed of groups of soloists. All the instrumental sections are limited to a scoring in trio. It is even possible to imagine a categorical rejection of all pompous ostentation. The overture with its various sections is contrary to traditional models. What can certainly be found is a desire for colour which characterizes each scene of this Pastorale. The difference between the first two scenes is clearly defined by the use of the keys of D major and A major. In the little treatise written for the future Regent, the Duke of Orléans, Charpentier invests keys with certain qualities: D major is 'joyful and war-like', A major is 'joyful and rural'. This search for colour is constant in each of the scenes. The fourth is very curiously composed of a recitative by Actéon (who has just been transformed into a stag) and a long plaint in C minor ('obscur et triste'). The listener will also be struck by the various ways in which Charpentier sets the words to music. There are, in fact, very few true recitatives. On the other hand, one notes the frequency of melodic passages, interestingly constructed ensembles, such as Arthebusia's air alternating with the chorus, Actéon's long monologue (scene 3), and the final chorus with its various expressive facets.

Actéon is a work which employs the most classical devices of the tragédie en musique established by Lully. Only here, everything is in miniature: the argument, the vocal and instrumental forces, the length. It is a delicate but powerful little work what testifies to the craftsmanship of a composer preparing for an assault on the absolute summits like Médée.

The action takes place in six scenes:

1. Acteon and the hunters are on the tracks of a large quarry. The whole scene is built around a chorus of hunters which is used as a refrain. The scene ends with an instrumental 'air'.

2. The scene changes to a spring in which Diana and her sisters are bathing. Diana's recitative soon changes into a dance rhythm which is then taken up and continued by her sisters. A Menuet follows, alternating between the voices and the instruments, and finally Arthebusia's air (with chorus) modelled after a Gavotte Air.

3. Acteon is tired and takes leave of his companions. He decides to rest in a quiet glade (the traditional 'sleep scene' of the tragédie en musique). He sings an extended monologue. Seeing Diana and her sisters, he attempts to hide, but is discovered. A dialogue follows between Acteon and Diana who refuses to listen to his explanation, 'chance and ill fortune are my only offence'. To prevent him from boasting of what he has seen, Diana and her sisters decide on his fate.

4. In a recitative Acteon beholds himself transformed into a stag. A long instrumental plaint evokes his dismay.

5. The hunters burst in as their hounds go after a stag. They look for Acteon to invite him to join the hunt, 'come to admire the fury of your hounds setting upon this stag at bay.'

6. Juno announces to the hunters the death of Acteon, changed into a stag and torn to pieces by his hounds. The pastorale ends with a chorus of hunters who express in varying degrees their sorrow and their anger. ---Jerome Lejeune, Translated by Derek Yeld, harmoniamundi.com

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