

Massenet - Thais (Viotti)[2002]

Written by bluesever

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Disc 1 1 Act 1. *Voici le pain...* 2 Act 1. *Hélas ! enfant encore* 3 Act 1. *Vision* 4 Act 1. *Toi qui mis la pitié dans nos âmes* 5 Act 1. *Esprit de lumière et de grâce* 6 Act 1. *Va, mendiant, chercher ailleurs ta vie !* 7 Act 1. *Voilà donc la terrible cité !* 8 Act 1. *Athanaël ! C'est toi !* 9 Act 1. *Il est jeune !* 10 Act 1. *Garde-toi bien !* 11 Act 1. *C'est Thad's, l'idole fragile* 12 Act 1. *Qui te fait si sévère* 13 Act 2. *Ah ! je suis fatiguée et mourir !* 14 Act 2. *Etranger, te voilà, comme tu l'avais dit !* 15 Act 2. *Je suis, Athanaël, Moine d'Antinoé !* 16 Act 2. *Meditation* Disc 2 1 Act 2. *Père, Dieu m'a parlé par ta voix !* 2 Act 2. *L'amour est une vertu rare* 3 Act 2. *Suivez-moi tous, amis !* 4 Act 2. *Celle qui vient* 5 Act 2. *Eh ! c'est lui ! C'est Athanaël !* 6 Act 3. *Prelude* 7 Act 3. *L'ardent soleil m'écrase* 8 Act 3. *O messager de Dieu* 9 Act 3. *Baigne d'eau tes mains* 10 Act 3. *Pater noster, qui es in coelis...* 11 Act 3. *Elle va lentement parmi les filles blanches* 12 Act 3. *Que le ciel est pesant !* 13 Act 3. *Qui te fait si sévère* 14 Act 3. *Thad's va mourir !* 15 Act 3. *Seigneur, ayez pitié de moi* 16 Act 3. *Sois le bienvenu dans nos tabernacles* 17 Act 3. *Te souvient-il du lumineux voyage*

Thaïs ... Eva Mei (soprano) Athanaël ... Michele Pertusi (bass-baritone) Nicias ... William Joyner (tenor) Palémon ... Christoph Fel (bass) Crobyle ... Christine Buffle (soprano) Myrtale ... Elodie Méchain (soprano) Albine ... Tiziane Carraro (mezzo) La Charmeuse ... Anna Smiech (soprano) A servant ... Enrico Masiero (tenor) Orchestra e Coro del Teatro La Fenice di Venezia Marcello Viotti - conductor rec. Teatro La Fenice, Venezia, November 2002

That 'Meditation' ensured the fame of Thaïs. This is a rather stark production from La Fenice. The minimalist sets are confined to staircases, assorted cubes and pillars; and, in the third act, a stage littered with crosses. At centre-stage, in the earlier scenes, there is something resembling a chaise-longue made up of thorns or razor wire and studded with roses.

This 'Meditation' is something quite startling. In the middle of Act II, as the notorious

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Alexandrian courtesan and prostitute, Thaïs, reclines on her thorny chaise-longue, we see her dreaming in a fitful sleep. She has been preached at by the priest Athanaël and has rejected his God. After realizing that her beauty and attraction could soon fade she begins to reject her world of luxury too. We see her dream. Above and at the rear of the stage, a 'T' shaped-cross, is surmounted by a scantily-clad female, who writhes over it seductively. Her attitude slowly changes and we perceive her forming a crucified figure. This change symbolizes the start of Thaïs's conversion.

Dreams figure elsewhere. In Act I Athanaël sees a vision of Thaïs being acclaimed for her portrayal of Aphrodite in an Alexandrian theatre. She is surrounded by erotic dancing, most sensuously staged in this production. Massenet's 'ballet' music and the quasi-erotic 'sea' music for the port of Alexandria prove, once again, that the best music is so often reserved for the devil. Well, almost, for one of the most moving moments comes with the final duet for Nathanaël and the dying Thaïs. Nathanaël is now sunk in degradation as he lusts after the sinking Thaïs. She reaches out in her last moments to her perceived vision of heaven. Wonderful theatre this, and Massenet responds with the most beautiful music for Thaïs; Eva Mei seizes attention here. Her singing throughout is colourfully expressive, first seductive and mocking and ultimately saintly and supplicatory. Her delivery is nicely controlled, her top notes secure, her sleek legato line easily accommodating Massenet's trills and coloratura contours.

Michele Pertusi is an agreeable match especially in their Act III duets. His opposite transition from heavenly devotion to satanic lust is well expressed. William Joyner makes a lusty Nicias, Athanaël's former school friend now given over to hedonism and the fickle charms of Thaïs. Christophe Fel's rich bass voice distinguishes the old monk Palémon. The supporting cast, chorus and dancers all contribute to an eye-popping dramatic staging.

The recommended alternative CD set is Decca 466 7662 with Renée Fleming, an outstanding Thaïs. A colourful, dramatic and satisfying production. -- Ian Lace, MusicWeb International

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