

Notes for *Les fêtes d'Hébé*

Imagine yourself thumbing through a copy of Plutarch and reading of the great poets and musicians of old, those who played a role in ancient Spartan victories, or who penned some of the finest Greek literature. Imagine then bringing these intriguing characters to life in words, music and dance. This extraordinary opera is one result of such an endeavour.

Its goal? Firstly, of course, to entertain. With a stage adorned with celebrity singers and dancers, and dazzling music from the 56-year old *enfant terrible* of French music, there is spectacle aplenty. But there are serious objectives at play here too. While Rameau (1683-1764) is often linked with Lully (1632-1687), he is very much a man of the eighteenth century, one concerned with the same agendas as the other great creative minds of the period - most notably, in operatic terms, with that other great Enlightenment theatre composer, Mozart. Such themes include a move away from established religion (as Tamino is drawn towards Sarastro, so too do the gods themselves leave Olympus); a benign ruler who is willing to show compassion and generosity (as in *Die Entführung* and *La Clemenza di Tito*); an awareness of human rights and social equality (Sapho and Idamante both release captives); and the emancipation of women (it is Sapho whose counsel and talent avert disaster, as it is the women in *Figaro* who control events). Even the last act's seemingly light pastoral setting is symbolic of Rousseau's idea of 'natural man': only away from the corrupting influence of civilisation can we be our best selves, faithful and constant.

In *Les fêtes d'Hébé* we also have a manifesto in celebration of the lyric arts: Poetry, Music and Dance (and Rameau went on to celebrate Sculpture in his *Pigmalion*). We hope you are moved by Sapho's broken heart, charmed by Hébé and Amour, thrilled by Tirtée and his army, ravished by the sensual choral music, seduced by the kind of harmonies that Schumann would be next to explore, and beguiled by Thomas' rich choreography. But what is significant is that if the Prologue sees Hébé leaving Olympus in search of somewhere better, she found it here on the banks of the Seine, where the power of the arts to move, unite and celebrate are so successful that Apollo and Terpsichore come to witness it. Perhaps then the message is that it is for us to create heaven here on earth? Whatever the goals of these extraordinary works, on whatever levels, it certainly has been heavenly to collaborate with such talented performers and to bring this masterpiece back to life.

Jonathan Williams

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