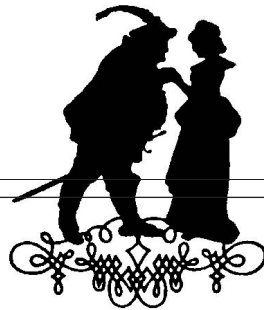


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## Opera Lafayette: *The Era of Madame de Pompadour*

### An Adventurous Immersion in the Music of mid-18th century France

With its annual spring Festival at El Museo del Barrio in New York City, the enterprising Opera Lafayette from Washington, DC, continued its ambitious three-year venture to examine various facets of 18th century French music. Featuring the era of three influential patrons of the arts, in reverse chronological order, the initial segment last year focused on *The Era of Marie Antoinette* (1756-1793), wife of Louis XVI. Many view Marie as representing everything wrong with the abusive, self-interested monarchy, but what Opera Lafayette gave us was the other side of the coin, a glimpse of the woman herself, her musical interests, and her influence on performances and composition. Next year's focus will be *The Era of Madame de Maintenon*, (1635-1719), the secret wife of Louis XIV, with a look, I presume, at woman's role in the arts and education and society amidst the weakening aristocracy at the onset of the 18th century.

Meanwhile, this year's festival focused on *The Era of Madame de Pompadour* (1721-1764), at the middle of the 18th century. As Artistic Director Ryan Brown pointed out in his introduction to the comprehensive 125-page program book, this period is usually associated both with the rococo style and the intellectual debates over the relative merits of French and Italian music, manifest in the famous *guerelle des bouffons* (War of the Comic Actors). It thus brought about new freedoms and forms of music expression. Referring to the thesis of a key essay in the program book, "Madama de Pompadour, Patron, Diva, Radical," by historical musicologist Callum Blackmore, Mr. Brown concluded his opening paragraph with "...at the center of the changing social and artistic landscape was the remarkable Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, a bourgeois woman who became Louis XV's *maîtresse-en-titre* and confidante, Madame de Pompadour."

### *Léandre et Héro*, and *Io*: Two Captivating Premieres

The adventurous festival made this abundantly clear from the start. The first night opened to a sold-out house with the major event of the Festival; two staged one-act quintessentially French opéra-ballets. The first was a revival of Pierre de La Garde's *Léandre et Héro*, a performance made possible by the acquisition of a newly recovered manuscript by the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, and a work in which Madame de Pompadour herself performed the role of Héro. The second was an equally extraordinary event, the world premiere of Rameau's *Io*, left unfinished in his lifetime, but completed with music from Rameau's comic opera of 1745, *Platée*, under the direction of Sylvie Bouissou, founder and editor of the complete edition of Rameau's works (*Opera Omnia*). In her biography of the composer, she notes the parallels between the plot of *Io* and *Platée*: in both works Jupiter and Apollo try to seduce a naive nymph, arousing the jealousy of Juno, and both feature the character of *La Folie* (Madness). The world premiere by Opera Lafayette of her resulting reconstruction was a revelation.

One compelling element of these productions (aside from the music itself) was dance, from two esteemed but divergent dance companies, one baroque the other modern. From the baroque came the New York Baroque Dance Company of Artistic Director Catherine Turocy; from modern dance came another experienced choreographer, Seán Curran, whose step dancing roots showed up periodically. All this might seem on the surface just more rococo extravaganza, but not so as the two companies danced both separately and in tandem.,

In *Léandre et Héro*, with a plot drawn from Greek mythology, simple white columns represented the city of Sestos. The two lovers, Léandre, fine young tenor Maxime Melnik, and Héro, acclaimed soprano Emmanuelle de Negri, discouraged by their parents, but encouraged by the gods, soon must endure a prolonged storm during which they are separated. The dancers from Seán Curran's



Emmanuelle de Negri, Héro; Maxime Melnik, Léandre; Dancers, Seán Curran Company and New York Baroque Dance Company  
Photo: Sierra Prasada

Company representing water spirits and the roiling ocean in skin-tight, blue-green body suits, carry Léandre away over the waves. In despair, Héro throws herself into the turbulent sea. Later, after the lovers are rescued and reunited, dancers from Ms. Turocy's troop, in baroque costumes, joined the ocean scene as Tritons.



Douglas Williams, Neptune; Maxime Melnik, Léandre; Emmanuelle de Negri, Héro; Dancers of Seán Curran Company and New York Baroque Dance Company  
Photo: Sierra Prasada

As the *Opéra-Ballet* closed, the fine chorus, then positioned in the aisles, offered the heartening message that (no surprise!) love conquers all.

Another compelling element of the evening was the colorful, elaborate costumes especially for *Io* by acclaimed artist and costume designer Machine Dazzle; his updated pseudo-rococo style was simply breathtaking and encapsulated the essence of the flamboyant rococo style emerging in the era of Madame de Pompadour. (Another informative article in the program book by Melissa Hyde and Mark Ledbury fully explores this topic, “Rococo to the Max: Pompadour’s Profusion.”) And as Mr. Dazzle had said to NPR’s Leila Fadel about his elaborate, often over-the-top costumes, “Everything is abundance and alive and beautiful and lush. And everything is like a dessert that has 20 layers.”



Gwendoline Blondeel, *La Folie*; Seán Curran Company Dancers, the Graces Photo: Jennifer Packard

A stunning example was the spectacular entrance for *La Folie* (“madness”), soprano Gwendoline Blondeel, who comes to intervene in the satirical spoof in which an energized Jupiter (fine double-cast bass-baritone Douglas Williams) and the hilarious Apollo (double-cast tenor Maxime Melnik) fight for the love of the mortal nymph Io. Cascading green folds of *La Folie*’s dress billowed from her elevated position at the back of the stage, making her as dazzling a presence as she was a glowing singer. At her feet a colorful bevy of Graces danced. Tenor Patrick Kilbride, a flamboyant Mercury, bounced around the stage looking like a rather large, purple plum sporting one drooping wing. In the satirical vein, Apollo’s fish-covered disguise as a mortal, while pursuing Io, alluded tongue-in-cheek to their Patron, Madame de Pompadour, born Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson (fish).

As in *Léandre et Héro*, the dance was captivating especially in the extended storm which buffeted Jupiter, Io and Apollo with whirling water spouts, surging waves and water-tossed seaweed.



Douglas Williams, Jupiter; Maxime Melnik, Apollo; and The Seán Curran Company Dancers Photo: Sierra Prasada

Throughout both performances, bravura harpsichordist and conductor Avi Stein led the Opera Lafayette period chamber orchestra with idiomatic vigor, with especially invigorating touches in the fabulous storm scenes, apt pacing for the many dance sequences, and animated brio for all the humorous moments, especially in the satiric and overtly comic *Io*. And how wonderful it was indeed to hear the richly nuanced and magnificent score of yet more Rameau.

### “In the Salons of Versailles” Surviving a plague of uncertainties

The second night of the Festival was a concert titled “In the Salons of Versailles,” a program designed by concertmaster and violinist Jacob Ashworth to highlight the variety of music championed by both Madame de Pompadour and the Dauphine Marie-Joséphine de Saxe, each a talented harpsichordist and Madame de Pompadour, a nice soprano as well. As Mr. Blackmore pointed out in his program notes to this concert, “musical talents were forged in the Enlightenment salon, perhaps the

most important venue for women's musical activity in eighteenth-century Europe." Mr. Ashworth had built the program very much around the esteemed Franco-American harpsichordist Justin Jonathan Taylor and the internationally renowned French soprano Emmanuelle de Negri.

Alas, however, at this point a series of unanticipated events began to plague the Festival. The unexpected visit of President Biden to the area that afternoon, caused traffic jams and blockades. Many never made it to the performance, although the Festival did try to help by delaying the start of the performance by half an hour. But a more serious hiccup lingered from the previous night. Just before the performances of the opera double bill, Mr. Brown announced that Ms. Negri, scheduled to sing the roles of both Héro and Io was victim to a severe allergy attack, (the nemesis for many in this pollen-plagued spring), but would attempt to gather her strength and sing both roles anyway, with an understudy waiting in the wings to take over from the side if necessary. (Evidently in a previous DC performance she had succumbed to her allergies, and a cover from the side sang while Ms. Negri pantomimed the role on stage.) Admirably, however, Ms. Negri completed the evening in New York with refined vocal assurance.

But doing so had taken its toll on her voice, necessitating her withdrawal from the second night's concert. In her place, soprano Gwendoline Blondeel stepped in, following her stunning success the previous night in the virtuoso role of *La Folie* (the *Platée* insert). All this meant a slight change of program, for example dropping a cantata by Hasse and an aria from Rameau's *Zorastre* to have concluded the program. But retained was the magnificent aria from Pergolesi's rarely performed opera seria *L'Olimpiade*, "Mentre dormi, Amor fomenti." The works for harpsichord, usually with idiomatic interaction with one or two violins (Jacob Ashworth and June Huang), and/or viola

(Isiah Chapman), were a delight. Especially lovely were Rameau's *Pièces de clavecin en concert* #5, I *La Forqueray*, II *La Cupis* and III *La Marais* characterized by charming sequences, poignant dissonances and contrasting tempi.

### **Amid more uncertainties, Pergolesi triumphs, as does the Festival**

At the other end of the spectrum, the Festival closed on the third night with two quintessentially Italian works, highlighting the vitality and influence of perhaps the most frequently performed and popular of Italian musicians at the outset of the era of Madame Pompadour, Giovanni Pergolesi (1710-1736) whose popular intermezzo *La serva padrona* ushered in the music of comedy that would soon dominate the century and which soon became a hit in France in its translation, *La servante maitresse*. Then the program concluded with the last major work of the sadly short-lived Pergolesi, his *Stabat mater*, performed also with great frequency in the 18th century and a glorious sacred complement to *La servante maitresse*.

But an even more serious hiccup arose before the third night's double bill; alas, Conductor and Musical Director Patrick Dupré Quigley tested positive for Covid. Thus the ever-resourceful Ryan Brown stepped in to lead a spirited semi-staged production of *La servante maitresse*, with a pair of seasoned baroque specialists, soprano Hannah Priest and bass-baritone Jonathan Woody making for a delightfully energized pair as the would-be mistress and master. The mute *commedia* role of Scapin performed by Patrick Kilbride helped make much fun of the disguises and occasional slapstick, although he had no chance to recite any of the English dialogue by Nick Olcott or to use his light tenor voice as he had in *Io* as Mercury. It was a rare treat indeed to hear and see the semi-staged French version, *La servante maitresse*, of Pergolesi's seminal and influential work.

As for the *Stabat Mater*, Concertmaster Jacob Ashworth ably stepped in for the ill conductor to oversee a moving performance of Pergolesi's poignant work as well as playing the violin. And the never-tiring Gwendoline Blondeel was splendid as the scheduled soprano, complemented by mezzo-soprano Sarah Meskin. The rich blending of their well-matched voices in the many duets more than compensated for the uncertainties of the evening.

In the end, some last-minute adjustments helped turn this enterprising Festival by Opera Lafayette of mid-18th century France into a vibrant success in the face of the several complications. Goodwill prevailed amidst many fine performances; good humor helped too, aided by the delightful rarities on stage from both Pergolesi and Rameau. Indeed this most important French composer of the day provides perhaps the archetypal embodiment for the power of humor and its benefits. As Sylvia Bouisson comments in her fine program essay

on *Io*, "Rameau lacked neither playfulness nor humor. He had a certain detachment from the social conventions of his time." It seems from the lessons of this Festival that the same might be said of Madame de Pompadour - as performer, patron, impresario, and influential confidante to the King, in an era that served to define the shifting tides of mid-18th century France.

Thus the Festival's program moved from the heart of the traditional French works of the period epitomized in Rameau's *Io* to the invasion of the radically simplified *galant* style emerging with Pergolesi. Madame di Pompadour had gingerly supported both camps, as the second festival night, "In the Salons of Versailles," also illustrated. But the *pièce de résistance* of the Festival was certainly, and appropriately, the opening night's spectacular double bill of *Léandre et Héro* followed by Rameau's *Io* in its recently completed version. It was an evening to savor indeed.



Gwendoline Blondeel, *La Folie*; Seán Curran Company Dancers, the Graces

Photo: Jennifer Packard