

Haydneum 2025: In the Name of Haydn the Father

01/09/2025, Classykeo – Claire-Marie Caussin

<https://www.classykeo.com/2025/09/01/haydneum-2025-au-nom-dhaydn-le-pere/>



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REPORT – For its third edition, the Haydneum Festival is presenting *Armida* (by Haydn, of course) at the Esterházy Palace in Fertőd, Hungary, served by a cast that represents it with all the required dedication, to do it full justice.

If we often hear about the ‘divine Mozart’, at the Esterházy Palace in Fertőd it is Haydn who is worshipped – less ‘Papa Haydn’ than the patriarch, who influenced future generations. This is only fair towards the one who had devoted so many years to the musical entertainment of this Hungarian castle.



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Haydn in his palace

Going to Fertőd is a kind of pilgrimage in itself, where one comes to its temple to worship Haydn. A Hungarian research centre, the Haydneum has the particularity of combining the interpretation of the works of Haydn and of his contemporaries with archive research, restoration of manuscripts, and digitalisation of musical scores. A complete activity, epitomised by the artistic director György Vashegyi, who on August 29 conducted *Armida* – the composer's penultimate opera, and the last composed for the court of the Esterházy Princes. A concert version only, without the fantastic scenery that the libretto calls for; but the gilding of the salon where the concert was held, crowned with a fresco representing Apollo on his chariot, offered a perfect sanctuary for this music.

Pagans versus Christians

It is a cult story of religious rivalries that Haydn sets to music, with the well-known loves of Armida and Rinaldo; and even if the libretto is not the sharpest dramatically, what does it matter when the couple of soloists give so much of themselves? It is not surprising that with Vasilisa Berzhanskaya's voice, the enchantress shudders the faith of the Christian knight: very deeply anchored lows and piercing high notes, a diction that goes from sensuality to fury, musicality at all times – could one have hoped for a more adequate voice? We are especially admiring the intelligence of the performer, who gives each phrase

of the score a nuance, a colour, or a quality of articulation, which she never leaves to chance.



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In the end, Rinaldo will not sacrifice faith on the altar of love: the tenor Zoltán Megyesi valiantly dons the knight's armour, with a remarkably projected voice, filling, almost to saturation, the highly resonant acoustics of the place. The final duet of Act I is a great vocal moment, where decibels, vocalisations and fiery sentiments are unleashed.



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Community of the group

The secondary roles obviously have less dramatic and musical impact than the leading couple, with the possible exception of Szilveszter Szélpál, who furnishes his Idreno with all due authority. The soprano Ella Smith is perfectly delicate as Zelmira, while Attila Varga-Tóth, as Ubaldo, deploys a welcome aplomb throughout the work, being notably inspired by his colleagues in the trio closing Act II. The last member of the cast, the tenor Léo Guillou-Keredan, is entrusted with a role (Clotarco) which certainly offers him little to sing, but in which he reveals himself convincingly.



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Conductor György Vashegyi has thus found performers up to the challenge, who were supported in their service by the musicians of the Orfeo Orchestra. With its echoes of *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, the score takes on a theatrical density under their hands, a density which is maintained even in the most tender pages. But it is especially in the third act, when Armida's anger unfolds, that they reveal all the colours and brilliance of which they are capable, multiplied by the acoustics of the place.

We can only hope that this celebration will find its fulfilment in a recording, because this version would deserve a place even within a very narrow selection. Haydn's eulogies may not have yet been sung.



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