

Haydn's Armida at the Haydneum Festival 2025 at Esterháza Castle – Enchantress and wizard – Review

01/09/2025, Concertclassic – Laurent Bury

<https://www.concertclassic.com/article/armida-de-haydn-au-festival-haydneum-2025-du-chateau-esterhaza-magicienne-et-magicien-compte>



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For its third edition, the Haydneum Festival in Esterháza is now well established within the walls of the castle that Prince Esterházy had built for himself from 1765 in Fertőd, Hungary. Brand new since its recent restoration, the palace is the natural setting for an event that intends to revive the music that the prince loved so much, around its main composer, Joseph Haydn (two other festivals in Budapest complete this summer season, one devoted to sacred music in the spring, and another to Haydn's contemporaries in the autumn).

After *L'infedeltà delusa* in the summer of 2023, and *L'isola disabitata* in the fall of 2022,¹ this time it is the turn of *Armida*, an opera that has had two complete recordings (Dorati in 1978, Harnoncourt in 2000). Nothing replaces the experience of live performance, and we were curious to hear the work 'in earnest', because opera houses were not very interested in Haydn, except for rare productions of his comedies, intended for very young singers. The composer, however, deserves a real place on stage: the success of this concert version

¹ <https://www.concertclassic.com/article/lisola-disabitata-de-haydn-lacademie-franz-liszt-de-budapest-pourvu-que-lon-sen-donne-les>

allows us to affirm it. Provided, of course, that the magic of inspired performers transfigures a score that needs to be tackled head-on.

The magic works again...

Luckily, the master of the operation is precisely the expected wizard. In the repertoire of the Age of Enlightenment,² and even now in that of the nineteenth century, György Vashegyi has already had many opportunities to prove what he was capable of, and many complete recordings are now available to confirm this. With *Armida*, the magic works again, and the Hungarian conductor's discourse is fully convincing: under his baton the score breathes, comes alive, is adorned with various colours, turns theatrical, and we savour its beauty just as much as its dramatic effectiveness. The Orfeo orchestra has of course its share of this success through the balance of the sections and the exuberance of the instruments present to better oppose the camp of Moslems to that of Christians.



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² The proof is in the superb version of Rameau's *Castor et Pollux* (1737 version), just released by Alpha Classics, featuring the voices of Judith Van Wanroij, Reinoud Van Mechelen, Tassis Christoyannis and Véronique Gens. This recording is part of a Centre de musique baroque de Versailles / Müpa Budapest / Early Music Festival / HAYDNEUM co-production, in partnership with the Institut français de Budapest (2 CD ALPHA1148).

Gallantry and virtuosity

Concerning the six soloists, the cast is half-native, half-foreign, the conductor having called on several singers who are used to his productions, while making room for a few newcomers. Among the Hungarians, we find in Idreno (equivalent to Hidraot in the Quinault version) the baritone Szilveszter Szélpál whose clear timbre and eloquence are appreciated. The tenor Zoltán Megyesi works wonders as Rinaldo, with the right amount of gallantry in the heroic arias, the equally necessary virtuosity, and above all, the expressiveness that makes the accompaniment and the aria with which he abandons Armida one of the great moments of the evening. In the less exposed role of Ubaldo, Attila Varga-Tóth proves to be quite up to the demands of the score.



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A young French tenor to follow

Among the non-Hungarian speakers, we reencounter Ella Smith, who sang Vespina in *L'infedeltà delusa* during the first edition of the festival. Zelmira is not a maid, but the role above all requires charm and delicacy, and the New Zealand soprano finds opportunities to shine in it. With his outstanding presence in the small role of Clotarco, the young French tenor Léo Guillou-Keredan's next appearances should be followed back in his native country.

Vasilisa Berzhanskaya takes up the challenge



Finally, and above all, what a genius idea to have called on Vasilisa Berzhanskaya (*photo*) to play the title role! The Russian mezzo-soprano is, oh, so much of an enchantress for a character that allows her to deploy her immense talent by exploring the whole range of effects. Even as she began a transition to the roles of a great dramatic soprano, the singer continued to fascinate with the opulence of her lows, with an agility that was never faulty, and with an intelligence of the text that allowed her to take up the challenge of her last aria: in ‘Ah, non ferir, t’arresta’, Haydn had her repeat the same quatrain three times – but the performer’s level of involvement prevents us from realising it. And what can we say about her angry aria, ‘Odio, furor, dispetto’, which nailed the viewers to their seat with the astounding power she unleashed? From now on, we have only one wish: that after having been Sinaida in *Moses and Pharaoh* in Aix and Lyon,³ Madame Berzhanskaya should return soon to captivate the French public!

Laurent Bury

³ <https://www.concertclassic.com/article/moise-et-pharaon-de-rossini-lopera-de-lyon-charlton-est-ce-toi-compte-rendu>