



HAYDN, *Armida* – Eszterháza

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<https://www.forumopera.com/spectacle/haydn-armida-esterhaza/>

A taste of coming back!

On 29 August, at Esterházy Castle in Fertőd, on Hungarian territory, the Haydneum Foundation – the Hungarian Centre for Early Music – presented a concert version of *Armida*, Haydn's penultimate opera, and the last one created in the country stronghold of the prince's family, of which the composer was employed for nearly thirty years. It is known that one of the members of the family loved Italian opera and puppet shows, passions for which he had two theatres built and even rebuilt on either side of the main courtyard. The ravages of time and the vicissitudes of history have not spared them, and if the second has been partially restored, all that remains of the first is the regret of its disappearance.

So it was simply in the so-called Apollo Room, located in the centre of the first floor of the palace – also largely restored – and in the room that precedes it, now called the Haydn Room, that the listeners were able to take their seats, in Louis XVI medallion armchairs, a style contemporary of the construction of the building that the Empress Maria Theresa – the mother-in-law of the aforementioned sovereign – visited. The seats for the prince's family are in the front row in the Apollo Room and remain unoccupied even in his absence. This fact, which may seem to reveal an archaic etiquette, indicates above all the willingness of the current head of the family to make himself available whenever his health allows him to do so in order to prolong the story and accompany the rediscovery of forgotten musical riches, which is the main objective of the Hungarian Centre for Early Music.

Far from being a melting pot of the past, the latter aims to recreate the melting pot of intra-European musical exchange, which this territory had been in the eighteenth century, by reviving sources that have fallen into oblivion. The programme of this third festival in Eszterháza bears witness to this: of course Haydn is the pivot, but obviously Mozart is present, as well as Schubert, Carl Philip, Emmanuel Bach, Beethoven, Graun, Antonio Rosetti and Josef Antonin Stepan, with the help of Andreas Staier, Vittorio Ghielmi and Attilio Cremonisi to

name only the most famous soloists, and the orchestras *Il Suonar parlante* and the *Orfeo orchestra*. The program can be viewed here: www.haydneum.com

It is the latter ensemble that was in operation on August 29, led by **György Vashegyi**, who is also artistic director of the Hungarian Centre for Early Music. It is an understatement to say that he has 'fixed' us from the outset, like a tamer stuns an animal, which he subjugates and thus submits to his authority. There is no brutality, no emphasis in his gestures, no inspired mimicry, but a constant precision in the indications, which obtains from the artists of the **Orfeo Orchestra** a sound rendering that the acoustics of the living room reverberate and make even more momentous. In this performance, Haydn's music is no longer the 'sweet' music that one listens to with ease, but a muscular discourse, full of sap, which fills the ears – superb brass, rumbling strings, striking percussion – and becomes an emanation of vitality whose melodic range and instrumental ideas had undoubtedly inspired Mozart, and whose firm articulation wrestles victoriously against the stagnation of the libretto. You sense the charm, feel the vigour, and admire the combination which conjoins suppleness, line holding and precision of accents by making the colours glitter. While the plot is stalling, it is a real tour de force which captivates to the extent that at the end it makes us yearn to hear this *Armida* again under the same conditions. Although we are anxious to learn the date of the radio broadcast, it is only a pity that no studio recording is scheduled to be made.



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An inspired conductor, excellent musicians, with top soloists, nothing could harm the overall success. Clotarco is an acolyte, a knight in the Frankish army whom Ubaldo, Rinaldo's friend, entrusts with exploring part of the terrain. It is the young tenor of French origin, **Léo Guillou-Keredan**, with a pleasant timbre,



who expresses with sobriety but conviction the turmoil of a character who is at first sensitive to the latent threats of an unknown landscape before resuming the course of his mission. As Rinaldo was seduced by Armida, he must be charmed by Zelmira, according to Idreno's evil plan. But she recoils, and since her boss has no regard for her, she will come to the aid of this young man, who is so attractive. A probable but faded and aborted echo of the comic feminine element of Cavalli's Venetian opera, Zelmira finds in **Ella Smith** a performer with a very agile and well-trained voice, a master of artful virtuosity with a keen preoccupation for nuances.

Her infernal master, whose 'machismo' provokes her revolt, is embodied by **Szilveszter Szélpál**, whose baritone voice first makes us regret the darker colours to which the recordings have accustomed us. But the aplomb and firmness of the accents, combined with a certain musicality, because he never tries to inflate them – a constant concern for musical coherence so dear to Haydn that the conductor reproduces both scrupulously and just as naturally – and his overall incarnation calls for nothing but praise. The only small regret is the absence of the trills which Samuel Ramey so generously entertained us with in the Dorati recording. He finds in **Attila Varga-Tóth**, who sings Ubaldo, the head of the mission who has come to rescue Rinaldo, a partner at his level in the scene where they display their hypocrisy, and this young tenor has seduced us throughout with the suppleness of his voice, the clarity of the projection and his ability to nuance it to express the character's feelings. He has a great presence, and we can prefigure the best for him in this repertoire.

Rinaldo, the knight who, like Ulysses beside Circe, forgets who he is, is undoubtedly the most trying male role, by its length and the expressive intensity it demands of its performers. **Zoltán Megyesi** can hold his head high: he took up the challenge with a probity that deserves admiration. The timbre is not one that immediately seduces, but we lay our arms down in front of the mastery of his means, which he knows exactly and controls them so precisely that his vocal offer is exactly the right one. His conduct in the third act is admirable in this respect, whilst the performance is also toeing the line dear to the composer.

In the title role, **Vasilisa Berzhanskaya**, whose deep lows of Sinaid, heard five years ago in Pesaro, was Marilyn Horne's heiress, and who now presents herself as a soprano. She can certainly do it, as her exceptional vocal range allows her to evolve at the top of the register with ease and brilliance. But will she be as



exceptional as she had appeared as a mezzo? Only time will tell. At the premiere, these distinctions were not posed and the richness of the singer's voice as well as her technical mastery allow her to brilliantly triumph over the possible pitfalls of virtuosity. The only small reservation is that the vocal generosity seemed a little excessive in the first act, where Armida first appears to us as a worried lover. But this excess can be understood: the singer may have chosen to express the monstrosity of the character through these excesses, as if this power betrayed her deep nature in spite of herself. In any case, the impact was such that Vasilisa Berzhanskaya, far from the images representing her as a murky demonic temptress, with tonight's subtle makeup she seemed not to be, and obtained the only 'isolated' applause, the audience perhaps conforming to Haydn's wish that the musical continuity should not be interrupted by eventual guttural outbursts.

This restraint was compensated for by the long rhythmical applause 'Hungarian style', which greeted the artists endlessly, in an atmosphere of shared euphoria!