

MEDEA

Composed by Luigi Cherubini (1760 1842)

First Performed : Teatre Feydeau, Paris March 1797

Scene of the action: Ancient Cornith

Act I

The opera opens as Glauce, daughter of King Creon, prepares for her nuptials with Jason, victorious leader of the Argonauts. The chorus of handmaidens attempts to cheer the princess who has suddenly fallen victim to awful premonitions of the wrath of the evil Medea of Colchis who was formerly married to Jason. She sings the lovely aria, "Amor, vieni a me" to rally her spirits, and to counter any ill omen. Creon enters next and declares his protection for the two children of Jason's former marriage. The March of the Argonauts announces Jason's entrance. During the choral presentation, mention is made of the town of Colchis, famed locale on the eastern banks of the Propontus and origin of the Golden Fleece. Just hearing the title of the place causes Glauce to shiver. Jason reassures his betrothed and disavows his marriage to Medea (claiming he was snared by black magic, of course). Creon's Invocation to the Gods of Matrimony ("Pronube Devi") crowns the brilliant scene and is propelled by superior composition. After this grand declamation, a guard rushes in to announce the presence of a "weird" woman wanting audience. No one need ask her name! Medea follows on the heels of the guard and barges in on the company. There follows threats and protestations -- on Medea's part: to claim her rights (husband and children), on the part of the Corinthian court: to dispel her once and for all. Facing down Jason, she tries to shame him into admitting his abandonment ("Dei tuoi figli la madre") I'm the mother of your kids. And after the court departs, the act ends with a duet between Jason and Medea in which the latter's unsuccessful attempts to rekindle Jason's affections are mingled with their reminiscences of the feats involved in winning the Fleece ("O fatal vello d'or").

Act II

After a short orchestral prelude Medea is found lamenting her fate: that her children will be taught to hate their mother, who will be an exile. ("Ebben! Tutto mi manca") She implores Creon to let her stay another day to make her goodbyes. In a charged exchange with the king, she wins his consent ("Che mai vi posso far, se il duol mi frange il cor?" / What harm can I do, if such grief besets my heart?) -- Creon second guesses himself in wondering if he hasn't made the wrong decision. The scene ends with Medea (as aside) calling upon her infernal powers and Jove himself to assist in her vengeance, as Creon, Neris & the chorus provide underpinnings of apprehension and woe. In the next scene, Neris has her one aria: a declamation of her faithfulness to her hounded mistress, accompanied by oboe obbligato and marvelously understated string orchestration. Jason enters next and the excited exchange between he and Medea is precipitated by his learning that Creon has granted another day's respite to Medea. He nevertheless accedes to Medea's request to have a last day with their children. In fact, the scene is no more than a vehicle for Medea's thrilling aria of pretended grief and cunning, but also touching irony: ("Figli miei, miei tesor" / My children, my treasures). Jason is touched by the motherly instinct (supposed), and the duet between them ends with his wishes for a better future for Medea, who in her turn, disdains him further for his

abandonment and (as further aside) promises her vengeance should fall as well upon the innocents. ("Ah! dove mi porti, sdegnato mio cor?" / To what extremes would my wounded heart take me?)

After Jason departs, Medea puts her final plan into motion, charging Neris to deliver wedding presents to Glauce: a diadem and cloak to be worn at her wedding ceremony. Both have been invested with her black magic and will poison the wearer! The beautiful choral renditions of the nuptial rites beginning in the background (replete with invocation -- this time to the Imene, Goddess of Matrimony) provide a stirring contrast to Medea's seething rage as the act concludes.

Act III

Another brilliant orchestral prelude opens Act 3 and is succeeded by Medea's chilling invocation (Yes! Yet another) to the infernal deities. ("Numi, venite a me, inferni Dei!") The sorceress announces her intent to liquidate all objects of Jason's affection -- virgin bride and children. Neris returns from the palace with the two children. As she raises her knife to do the deed, a lapse of conscience takes over and she laments the deed, handing the kids over to Neris to remove them from sight and temptation ("Del fiero duol che il cor me frange, nulla mai vincera l'orror" / Over this overwhelming grief of heart, horror should not obtain a victory!). But, her hesitation is not conclusive, and in the final extended aria of the opera, ("E che? Io son Medea!" After all, then, am I not Medea) she rethinks her mercy and vows that love will not win the day: ("No, giammai, non trionfi l'amor!"). Needless to say, this aria is a masterpiece of invention and a crown jewel in the Cherubini opus. It remains a monumental challenge in the soprano coloratura repertory. But even its pyrotechnics are not a cessation to the role's challenge. After its strains Medea reenters the temple in which Neris took refuge with the children and sings the "Atre Furie" (calling on the evil gods to arm her awful judgment), a cabaletta-like pronouncement, almost entirely in the upper register. At the same time, the wedding is interrupted by calamity. Glauce is dead. Jason and the populous descend upon Medea, but come too late, and can only watch the temple burn to the ground. The opera ends with the lament of the Jason and the crowd.

Comments:

Often called by its French title, *Medee*, the opera is not to be confused with Charpentier's baroque piece of the same title. A quote by Winton Dean should suffice: "It is a pure classical tragedy that owes its strength to the equilibrium between the violence of the subject, all the more potent for being psychological, and the severe restraint of the style."