

QUO VADIS?

Religious Opera in 5 acts

Music by Jean Nougès

Libretto by Henri Cain

First Performance: Nice, February 9, 1909

Act I. At the gardens of Petronius. Eunice and Iras, slaves, decorate statues. Petronius enters with Vinicius, the latter telling of his infatuation for Lygia. Eunice tells Vinicius of a soothsayer who can predict the future. He is summoned and says Lygia is daughter of a king, and is now a Roman hostage. Chilon, the fortune-teller, is sent out to ascertain the meaning of a symbol - a fish - which Lygia had once traced in the sand.

Act II. Nero, the emperor, gives a great festival. At Nero's side is a beautiful stranger, Lygia, and this arouses the jealousy of Nero's favorite mistress, Poppaea, but Petronius soothes her. Vinicius and Lygia are left alone together, and he pleads for her love. Lygia answers that she cannot be his because she is a Christian and he a pagan. Suddenly a ruddy glare overspreads the sky. It is Rome burning, but Nero goes on singing and playing the lyre untroubled by the danger. The populace suddenly rises, accusing Nero of having caused the great fire. Poppaea begs Petronius to allay the roused passion of the multitude.

Act III. The scene is a wineshop on the banks of the Tiber, filled with soldiers, gladiators, and sailors. Chilon traces the sign of a fish. Demas, a Christian, tells him that the apostle will be among them that night. Chilon has ascertained that the fish is a symbol of Christianity. He also learns that Lygia is with Demas' wife, Myriam, and that these two will go forth that evening. Chilon bids Croton, the giant gladiator, come with him. The Christians assemble at a house on the river, and Lygia and St. Peter, entering this house, are observed, and many of the Christians taken prisoner.

Act IV. First scene is at the arena of the Colosseum. Christian martyrs are seen, among them Demas and Myriam. Peter comforts them. Vinicius enters, telling Lygia to be hopeful, as he has contrived for her escape. But Petronius shuts off the means of escape, and Vinicius declares his intention of following Lygia to death. The next scene shows the imperial box, with Nero and Poppaea. Ursus, a slave of Lygia's from down in the arena, by his enormous strength saves Lygia from being killed by a fierce aurochs, and Nero grants her life. Chilon creates a mob scene in the circus, and Nero is charged with being the incendiary that set Rome afire, and has to flee from the popular fury.

Act V. Petronius at his rural estate is urged by Lygia and Vinicius to go with them to Sicily, but he declines, and issues a letter of parting to Nero. Being convinced that this will mean his death, he has his arteries opened by Theocles, the physician, and dies with Eunice, who confesses her love for him toward the last. The news of Nero's death and of the safety of Petronius arrives too late to prevent Petronius' end.