



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Triumph of Baroque Splendor: Matthew Locke's Psyche

Theater an der Wien, 05.03.2025 [ENA]

Few composers have defied the conventions of their time with such audacity and brilliance as Matthew Locke, and his *Psyche*, a semi-opera first performed in 1675, is a perfect testament to his ingenuity. In a dazzling performance under the inspired direction of Sébastien Daucé, this rarely staged masterpiece revealed itself to be a work of immense dramatic power and musical invention.

With a stellar cast, evocative staging, and a masterful balance between spoken word and musical enchantment, this production breathed new life into a piece that challenges, surprises, and ultimately captivates its audience. While the operatic traditions of Italy and France dominated the 17th century, England carved a unique niche in the musical world, producing some of the most intriguing and unconventional works of the era. *Psyche* exemplifies this distinctly English approach to musical drama: an interweaving of spoken dialogue, vocal solos, and instrumental interludes, which, rather than conforming to a single aesthetic, embraces a hybrid form that demands a meticulous and sensitive execution.

This production, meticulously led by Sébastien Daucé, ensured that every nuance of Locke's harmonically adventurous score was brought to the fore, while the integration of actors and singers was managed with such finesse that the transitions felt utterly seamless. Sébastien Daucé, a conductor renowned for his profound scholarship and deeply expressive musicality, approached *Psyche* with an ideal blend of intellectual rigor and interpretative daring. Under his direction, the ensemble brought out the kaleidoscopic textures of Locke's score, from the rich dissonances that so scandalized his contemporaries to the achingly beautiful lyricism of his arias.

Daucé's tempi were impeccably judged, allowing the music to breathe while never losing its dramatic momentum. His careful shaping of phrasing and articulation gave the work a sense of both grandeur and intimacy, drawing the audience into the psychological complexity of the story with a mesmerizing intensity. At the heart of this production were performances of breathtaking depth and nuance. Lucile Richardot, in the role of the Chief Priest, delivered a performance of commanding authority and emotional weight. Her richly textured mezzo-soprano carried an almost prophetic resonance, embodying both divine wisdom and human vulnerability.

Her diction was exemplary, ensuring that the text's poetic intricacies were fully appreciated, while her vocal control lent a hypnotic quality to the more solemn passages. As Venus, Élodie Fonnard was an

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
Telefax: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.661
Email: contact@european-news-agency.com
Internet: european-news-agency.com

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intoxicating presence, her soprano gleaming with seductiveness and caprice. She embodied the goddess's jealous rage and haughty sensuality with dazzling versatility, shifting effortlessly from coquettish allure to imperious wrath. Her performance was particularly striking in the scenes where she conspires against Psyche, imbuing every phrase with a deliciously malicious charm.

Tristan Hambleton's Pan was a revelation—earthy, humorous, and irresistibly charismatic. His robust baritone conveyed both the rustic charm of the character and his deeper, more foreboding aspects. His interplay with the other characters, particularly in the more comic moments of the piece, provided a welcome contrast to the opera's more ethereal elements.

Equally impressive was Etienne Bazola as Vulcan. His portrayal was both vocally and dramatically riveting, embodying the god's gruff exterior while hinting at an underlying pathos. His bass-baritone resonated with a sonorous warmth that lent a fascinating complexity to his character, making him one of the evening's unexpected highlights.

Locke's music remains one of the most distinctive voices of his time, full of bold harmonic choices and unexpected twists. His use of dissonance, which baffled some of his contemporaries, felt thrillingly modern in this performance. The instrumental ensemble, under Daucé's meticulous direction, brought out every nuance of Locke's daring orchestrations, from the delicate interplay of recorders to the robust depth of the continuo section.

Particularly striking was the way Locke manipulated tonality to reflect Psyche's emotional journey. The moments of romantic ecstasy shimmered with luminous harmonies, while the darker, more tormented passages were infused with an unsettling chromaticism that heightened the drama.

The balance between the spoken and sung elements was achieved with astonishing fluidity, allowing the story to unfold with a natural, almost cinematic flow. The story of Psyche—a tale of love, doubt, and redemption—has been told in many forms, but rarely with such a rich fusion of music and drama. This production managed to capture both the mythic grandeur and the human fragility at its core. Psyche's journey, from blissful ignorance to tragic realization and ultimate transcendence, was rendered with an emotional immediacy that resonated deeply.

What made this performance so compelling was its ability to bridge the 17th century and the present, making Locke's music feel not like a historical artifact, but a living, breathing drama of universal relevance. The audience was drawn into a world where gods and mortals mingle, where love is as much a source of suffering as it is of joy, and where music serves as the ultimate means of expressing the ineffable.

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This Psyche was nothing short of a revelation. Sébastien Daucé and his exceptional cast and musicians brought Matthew Locke's visionary work to dazzling life, proving that this semi-opera deserves a place alongside the great masterpieces of the Baroque era. With its bold harmonies, captivating theatricality, and exquisite musical craftsmanship, this performance was a triumph—a rare and precious jewel in the operatic repertoire that, thanks to this production, will hopefully continue to shine for many years to come.

For those fortunate enough to have witnessed it, this Psyche was not merely a performance; it was an experience—an invitation to lose oneself in a world where music and mythology intertwine in the most glorious of ways.

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
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