

Paul Cienniwa

Feast of the Gods

The 14th Boston Early Music Festival: *Feast of the Gods* (11–17 June) reached a new level of excellence with the North American première of Lully's 1678 *Psyché*. The opera, acclaimed by national and local press, became the hub of Boston's musical life and the point of departure for an exceptionally high level of festival programming. Centred on the major operatic production, a series of 14 concerts and an international exhibition, the festival week was enhanced by a multitude of concurrent events, including symposia, workshops, masterclasses and a 'family day'.

For many attendees, a highlight of the biennial festival is the 'fringe concerts', an opportunity for musicians from near and afar to perform and publicize their activities alongside the main events. This year's fringe was hardly marginal. Organizations such as the Boston Clavichord Society, Early Music America, the Lute Society of America and the Viola da Gamba Society of America each presented concerts, and a wide range of performers from across the country organized their own programmes, including ensembles as distinguished and diverse as Liber unUsualis, RENAISSONICS, the Fanfare Consort, the New York Continuo Collective, Trio Settecento, La Donna Musicale and the Texas Camerata.

The Boston Early Music Festival wisely does not permit fringe programming during the official festival concerts, maximizing the ability of the public and fringe performers to attend festival concerts. Given the quality of the festival performers, any year-long concert series would be extraordinary with just half of the concerts presented during the week. This 'Feast of the Gods' was true to its name as a musical feast of the highest order.

Opening the festival (11 June), The King's Noyse joyfully played songs and dances of 16th-century Paris in a programme entitled 'Le jardin de mélodies: songs and dances of 16th-century Paris'. Percussionist Tom Zajac delighted the audience while playing multiple instruments simultaneously, and, in a cameo appearance, dancer Ken Pierce came onstage to join violist-turned-dancer Julie Andrijeski in a pair of galliades by Pierre Phalèse. As expected, David Douglass's masterful divisions brought the festival off to a thrilling start.

Philippe Pierlot, bass viol, and Jan Willem Jansen, harpsichord, gave 'Les festes galantes' on 13 June. Pierlot

played his 1718 Barak Norman instrument with remarkable *sostenuto* and bow control, encouraging this quietly expressive duo to become one of the festival's most memorable ensembles. While most of the week's performers were invited to perform encores, Pierlot's was exceptional: even with a slipped fret, he continued to play Marais as brilliantly and beautifully as before.

Two dramatically different vocal ensembles were featured on consecutive days. On 13 June, Dominique Visse's electrifying Ensemble Clément Janequin sang 'Les Plaisirs du Palais: a palindromic banquet of Franco-Flemish music' and on 14 June, the Orlando Consort gave 'The rose, the lily and the whortleberry: medieval and Renaissance musical representations of gardens and horticulture'. Each group represented a different type of perfection, but the juxtaposition of these two ensembles made for humorous comparison. While Visse's intonation-perfect sextet flaunted the bawdy 16th-century texts, the Orlando Consort showed a Victorian sensibility, apologizing for any risqué material.

The Boston Early Music Festival and Chorus filled New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall for a concert of John Eccles's *The Judgment of Paris* (1701) and orchestral movements by Jean-Philippe Rameau. While the Eccles paled in comparison to Rameau's excellent music, soprano Ellen Hargis, as Venus, was deservedly chosen as the winner of Paris's affections. Those who had already attended *Psyché* might have been hungry for more French airs, and Rameau delivered, leaving concert-goers humming as they left the hall. As in the opera, the orchestra was astounding. Boston is lucky to have violinist Robert Mealy as leader of this all-star orchestra.

15 June began with an 'Organ mini-festival', featuring the talents of William Porter and Jan Willem Jansen. In the morning, Boston's Old West Church was filled with listeners eager to hear music from Lully's time on the church's admirable C. B. Fisk (1971). Later at the First Lutheran Church, the two soloists were joined by lecturer Kerala J. Snyder for a Buxtehude and Böhm celebration on the Richards, Fowkes & Co. organ (2000).

As winner of the 2007 Cambridge Society for Early Music Erwin Bodky Prize, keyboardist Kristian Bezuidenhout stood out in a sea of exceptionally talented musicians. And while his masterfully imaginative continuo playing was an essential core of the Boston Early Music Festival Orchestra, it was his playing on 15 June, with violinist Petra Müllejans, that promoted this young fortepianist as one of classical

music's brightest talents. In a programme of three Mozart violin sonatas, Bezuidenhout exhibited a complete comprehension of everything Mozart, enjoying elegant phrasing while inviting humour and emotional spontaneity. Along with Müllejans's exquisite intonation and lyricism, this recital was easily among the best that the festival had to offer.

On the evening of 15 June, the audience was sadly disappointed to learn that Sequentia director Benjamin Bagby was unable to perform due to a bronchial illness that kept him in Paris. The original programme, 'The Rheingold curse: a Germanic saga of greed and revenge from the medieval Icelandic *Edda*', was retooled to offer parts of the Rheingold programme and a selection of medieval ballads and folk hymns from Sweden. The latter portion, performed by Ulv (a trio made up of Sequentia members), was well received by an enthusiastic public.

Eric Hoepfich's wind ensemble *Nachtmusik* performed 'Harmoniemusik' on the afternoon of 16 June, leading the festival away from 'early music' to Beethoven's op.71 Sextett. Performing on period clarinets, bassoons and horns, the brilliant and flawlessly beautiful playing made one wonder if period instruments have become easier to play. The delight of this concert was magnified by another appearance of fortepianist Bezuidenhout, this time in Mozart's K452 Quintett. Again, Bezuidenhout excelled, underpinning the entire festival experience.

The festival concerts concluded with Paul Leenhouts's The Royal Wind Music performing 'The Gods' flute heaven: consort music from the Spanish Netherlands after 16th- and 17th-century collections' (17 June). Featuring twelve young players of Renaissance recorders, the concert was a magnificent homage to early music's bright future. The ensemble was a delight to hear and watch as each member responded to Leenhouts's direction with infectious joy. At one point, a radiant Andreas Böhlen descended from the stage to improvise from the audience, assuring us that the future of old music is in good hands.

In recent years, the exhibition has seemed less important to the essence of the festival. As the performances have come to generate a more mainstream public, the exhibition has held on to the idiosyncratic quality that early music had 20 years ago. And sadly, while keyboard instrument-makers have always been a mainstay of the exhibition, there was about a 40 per cent decline from the 2005 festival. On the other hand, there were a few more stringed-instrument makers than in 2005, and it is good to see that Kate Buehler-McWilliams's 'Unprofitable instruments' remains profitable as a maker of the tromba marina.

The centrepiece of the festival is the operatic production, and *Psyché*, with its gleaming finale boasting 42 performers on stage, was at the heart of the week's festivities. Following the Lully/Molière *tragédie-ballet* of 1671, *Psyché* was rewritten in 1678 as a *tragédie en musique* with a new libretto by Thomas Corneille. (Corneille's older brother Pierre, incidentally, assisted with the 1671 version.) Retaining all of the music of the earlier incarnation, the popular opera was performed three times at the Académie Royale de Musique and in Modena, Lyon, Wolfenbüttel and Marseilles.

After the 2005 Boston Early Music Festival, musicologist John S. Powell proposed the 1671 *Psyché* to festival Artistic Directors Paul O'Dette and Stephen Stubbs. Ultimately the directors settled on the 1678 version, leading Executive Director Kathleen Fay to declare the project 'the largest, most complex and sophisticated historical reproduction that BEMF has ever attempted'. Directed by Gilbert Blin and music directors O'Dette and Stubbs, the five performances were brought to life with elegant sets (Caleb Wertebaker) and lighting (Lenore Doxsee) and extravagant costumes (Anna Watkins).

In spite of its scale, *Psyché* is a compact and effective drama, and Lully's setting is, for Baroque opera, quickly paced. The chorus appears only at the beginning and at the end of the opera, and most of the vocal writing is at the service of the drama. Even the dances (effectively choreographed by Lucy Graham) serve the plot, with Cyclops, Blacksmiths and Demons all painting the dramatic landscape. The three-and-a-half-hour opera concludes with an extended ballet, interweaving dance and song in a lengthy celebration to the glory of love.

The cast, made up of local and international performers, was uniformly outstanding, and the Boston-trained singers, notably newcomer soprano Yulia van Doren (Femme Affligée), held their own alongside Carolyn Sampson (*Psyché*) and Karina Gauvin (*Venus*). Overcoming previous productions, the diction was particularly clear, and historically informed gestures, coached by Ellen Hargis, were felt very naturally. The orchestra was, as expected, of a very high level, and the continuo group was particularly good, especially with the contributions of violist da gamba Erin Headley and, of course, festival *Wunderkind* Bezuidenhout.

Even with three repeat performances the following week several hours west of Boston, *The Wall Street Journal* concluded its beaming review of *Psyché* (20 June) by suggesting that 'some smart presenter should grab it and bring it to New York, Paris and beyond'. While this may

not be possible, Bostonians are already enjoying the 2007–08 Boston Early Music Festival Concert Series with performances by ensembles such as Le Concert des Nations, The Academy of Ancient Music and The Tallis Scholars. One question remains, however: what operatic masterpiece will be unearthed and revived in majestic splendor for the 2009 festival? Boston's enthusiastic audience will simply have to wait to find out.

doi:10.1093/em/cam095