

Ariane et Bachus

CHICAGO

Haymarket Opera

9/30/17

OPERA NEWS

HAYMARKET OPERA SCORED a coup at Chicago's Studebaker Theatre on September 30, with an excellent mounting of *Ariane et Bachus* by Marin Marais. The production marked the first complete staging of the work since 1696.

In truth, there are reasons why the piece isn't exactly a repertory staple; Marais cannot compete with Handel in theatrical insight or orchestral complexity. The clichéd libretto by one "Saint-Jean" presents a predictably formulaic array of the usual philandering gods, aggrieved mortals, and various and assorted confidantes and spirits. But the score is beguiling, and in Haymarket's clever treatment the whole thing just worked, and did so enchantingly. The opera was presented in the company's signature style, featuring spare set pieces, sumptuous costuming, and an overarching musicality that was quite extraordinary. One felt transported to the 17th century. Mike Winkleman's simple flats and wing pieces rendered the Isle of Naxos with a conscious naiveté. There was an adorable effect created by a set of mobile clouds used to produce the vengeful Juno's entrances. Meriem Bahri's ornate wardrobe fielded a swirl of comely brocades in a primary palette of rusts and maroons. Director/choreographer Sarah Edgar saw that the action clipped along. The dance interludes were executed with charm by the five-member corps de ballet, and within the cardboard confines of the material, character relationships were crisply delineated.

As Ariane, Kristin Knutson revealed a sparkling, fluid soprano with admirable flexibility and a good trill. Scott Brunscheen essayed Bachus with a singularly attractive young tenor voice that boasted an incisive ping on the climaxes and a delicately floated radiance in the upper register that was quite beautiful. The two blended most attractively in their love duet. Soprano Kimberly McCord delivered a passionate, and meltingly vocalized Dircée. All three lower-voiced male principles were impressive. Baritone Ryan de Ryke's bad guy Adraste was stylishly rendered with plenty of molten, burnished tone. The always solid bass-baritone David Govertsen created a sonorous and dramatically animated Géralde. Aaron Wardell was very amusing as the pompous King Aenarus, and coursed through the display writing skillfully (he also proved himself a good colleague when somebody's shoe buckle became caught on the hem of his robe, an onstage mini-crisis Wardell handled with smiling aplomb). Erica Schuller was an appropriately volatile Juno. Standouts among the ensemble included Nathalie Colas as Ariane's intimate Corcine, Olivia Doig as an impish Amour, and Justin Berkowitz as Phantase, the god of surreal dreams.

The ultimate star of the endeavor was the exceptional Haymarket period orchestra, here expertly led by company artistic director Craig Trompeter. Concertmaster Jeri-Lou Zike's strings were in fine fettle, and Brandon Podjasek delivered the arresting percussion writing with particular verve. The estimable Jory Vinikour provided a responsive continuo. Donald Nally's eight-voice chorus was terrific. This was a delightful evening, being creatively staged, beautifully sung and superbly played. I suppose those who missed it will have to wait another 321 years, but it's hard to imagine anyone making better work of this obscure opera than Haymarket has here. —Mark Thomas Ketterson