

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.

DIDASKALIA

Volume 8 (2011)

<http://didaskalia.net>

ISSN 1321-4853

About Didaskalia

Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλῖαι. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

Didaskalia is an English-language, online publication about the performance of Greek and Roman drama, dance, and music. We publish peer-reviewed scholarship on performance and reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field. If you would like your work to be reviewed, please write to editor@didaskalia.net at least three weeks in advance of the performance date. We also seek interviews with practitioners and opinion pieces. For submission guidelines, go to didaskalia.net.

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Didaskalia is published at Randolph College.

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Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

A Story of the Outcast in a Warehouse: *Medea*

Opera by Luigi Cherubini
 Libretto by François Benoît Hoffman/Nicolas Étienne Framéry
 Conducted and directed by Andreas Mitisek
 Costume design by Christine Cover Ferro
 Sound design by Bob Christian
 January 29, February 5 (reviewed) and 6, 2011
 EXPO Building Long Beach Opera, Long Beach, California

Reviewed by **Yoko Kurahashi**
Kent State University

Long Beach Opera's website description of the first production of the 2011-12 season, *Medea*, states: "Luigi Cherubini's 1797 score heightens the passion of the classic Greek tragedy with music that remains innovative to this day. In true LBO style, this daring production will be presented in an alternative space of unexplored theatricality."¹ Under the skillfully crafted, creative direction of Andreas Mitisek (the artistic director of Long Beach Opera, conductor and set/lighting designer for this production), this 95-minute performance of *Medea* in a space within the former EXPO Furniture store's warehouse² in Long Beach, California proved a successful revival of this opera and exploration of the space.

Medea is one of the most celebrated and admired operas by Italian composer Luigi Cherubini, who wrote more than 30 operas while living in Paris from the late eighteenth through mid-nineteenth century. Unfortunately, most of Cherubini's operas are now rarely performed, making this production of *Medea*, which originally premiered at the Théâtre Feydeau in Paris in 1797, all the more precious and valuable.

It was nine years after the failure of *Démophon* (1788), the opera he created for the libretto by Marmontel, that Cherubini composed the opera *Médée* for the libretto by François-Benoît Hoffman, one of the most successful librettists of his time. *Médée* was one of three opéras-comiques that Cherubini undertook in the 1790s.

The genre of opéra-comique was born in the early eighteenth century in the "great Fairs which brought together the whole population of Paris for business and entertainment" where "simple plays of an amusing, pastoral, or satirical nature," which were sung in couplets based on popular airs, and vaudeville were performed.³ By 1762, the year when the company Opéra Comique fused with its rival the Comédie-Italienne, opéra-comique had been developed into a "major art form" by the librettists and composers such as Sedaine, Philidor, Monsigny, Grétry, and Dalayrac. The distinctive feature of opéra-comique, that is, the combination of spoken dialogue with musical numbers, enabled the work to invoke "genuinely dramatic situations in scores of high musical quality."⁴



Suzan Hanson as *Medea* and Ryan MacPherson as *Jason*.

Photo by Keith Ian Polakoff. Courtesy of Long Beach Opera.

Médée, Cherubini's third opéra-comique of the 1790s, synthesizes his "experience in his earlier operas," placing, at the heart of it, "his exceptional ability to organize the sections symphonically, by motivic development and tonal movement."⁵ The spoken dialogue written by Hoffman is "propelled by moral rather than physical action,"⁶ making it possible to impart the complex emotions and feelings possessed by the heroine, the woman who is outcast by her husband Jason and is about to be expelled by his future father-in-law Creon, king of Corinth.

The premier production of Médée at the the Théâtre Feydeau was not particularly successful. The public, three years after the end of the reign of the Terror and the execution of Robespierre, were likely seeking something lighter and more amusing than Greek tragedy. The play by Euripides on which the opera is based won the third prize at the City Dionysia Festival at Athens in 431 B.C., along with two others of his tragedies, Philoctetes and Dictys, and the satyr play Theristai. Euripides's play and the myth of Medea and Jason have been adapted and reappropriated many times in literature, theatre, and music: by Seneca and Ovid (first century A.D.), by Jean-Baptiste Lully in his *Thésée* (1674), in Pierre Corneille's neo-classical adaptation (1693), in Marc-Antoine Charpentier's opera *Médée* (with Thomas Corneille, Pierre's brother, as his librettist, 1698), in Johann Christoph Vogel's *Médée à Colchis, ou la Toison d'Or* (1788), in Giovanni Simone Mayr's opera *Medea in Corinto* (1813), in Jean Anouilh's adaptation *Médée*, and in a number of contemporary works that include Roger Kirby's *Medea in Jerusalem* (2004), which is set in the Middle East with a modern Palestinian Medea and an Israeli Jason. Contemporary opera directors continue to revive and invoke this tragic tale of a powerful woman by premiering operas based on the Medea legend. In an article published in *Opera Now*, Della Couling notes that in 2003 she saw four world premieres of such works.⁷

Quite apart from the appeal of the Medea myth, the popularity of Cherubini's opera can, in part, be attributed to Maria Callas's performances as the ill-fated heroine in the 1950s and 1960s. Callas first performed the role at the Florence Maggio Musicale Festival in 1953, with Vittorio Gui conducting. A studio version, conducted by Tiullio Serafin, was recorded in 1957. Later that year, Leonard Bernstein brought the opera (starring Maria Callas) to a new level of artistry with his liberating, inspiring, and emotionally charged conducting of the score. After revival of *Medea* by Callas and Bernstein, a number of prominent singers—including Magda Olivero, Leyla Gencer, Leonie Rysanek, Anja Silja, Eileen Farrell, Anna Caterina Antonacci, Grace Bumbry, and Iano Tamar—have performed this role of a devastated, sorrowful, and revengeful woman.

Long Beach Opera's production of *Medea* is a valuable addition to the revivals of Cherubini's *Medea* and other *Medea*-based operas. Faithful to Hoffman's eighteenth century libretto, the LBO production explores human psychology, including the complex and emotionally explosive relationship between



Suzan Hanson as Medea.
Photo by Keith Ian Polakoff. Courtesy of Long Beach Opera.



Peabody Southwell as Neris and Robert Gomez as Creon.
Photo by Keith Ian Polakoff. Courtesy of Long Beach Opera.

Medea and Jason. Andreas Mitisek, who is known for his powerful, colorful, and sensitive musicality, conducts the full orchestra and directs the performance to produce a clear but emotionally charged piece. One of the strengths of this LBO production of Medea is its succinct translation into contemporary English by Mitisek and Suzan Hanson, who played the title role. As an aid to the audience, the LBO production projected supertitles on screens above the stage.⁸

While many of the past productions of Cherubini's Medea have been performed in Italian with sung recitatives written by Franz Lachner (1803-1890), Mitisek kept the spoken dialogue, as written by Cherubini, to communicate the characters' emotions and feelings. To keep the production simple and tight, Mitisek cut the chorus's parts, reducing the length of the performance to 95 minutes without an intermission. Mitisek's minimalist approach is effective and avoids the pitfalls of past productions with a full chorus that did not work well. For example, J. Wechsberg, reviewing the Vienna State's Opera's revival of Médée in 1972, criticized director August Everding's handling of the chorus that "bordered on the ridiculous,"⁹ and Robert Jacobson called the chorus in the 1982 New York City Opera production of Medea "murky."¹⁰

The raised performance space, reminiscent of a boxing ring, is located within the larger warehouse space that serves as the desolate landscape of Corinth. The audience, seated in folding chairs, faces this raised "arena" (square) stage from four sides. The seating capacity of the fourth side is reduced in order to accommodate the orchestra conducted by Mitisek. Within this cold, lifeless environment, the audience becomes part of the story as the citizens of Corinth who witness the fate of the abandoned woman. The bare industrial look of the theatre space is at different times "transformed" into a "futuristic stage," with a look of a space ship interior or a techno-disco.¹¹

The opera opens with unfathomable murmurings of Medea and the sound of heart beats, which become an eerie premonition of the tragedy that awaits all of the characters. All of the performers enter the stage, and except for Suzan Hanson as Medea, lie face down. The performers stay on the stage throughout the performance. In this "ensemble acting" style, in contrast to the star-system with multiple curtain calls between acts, the performers are able to tell the audience multiple reasons for their respective characters' actions,¹² minimizing the spectators' pre-judgment or pre-sympathy for certain characters and performers.

Although the stage is basically bare, Mitisek created variations in height on stage by adding multiple levels. For example, the center of the performance space, where Medea stays most of the time during the performance, is lower than its surrounding areas. This hollow on the stage metaphorically represents the status of Medea as the older wife that her husband Jason is abandoning to marry the younger Dirce, Creon's daughter. The atmosphere of the bare stage is changed by the characters' presence and absence, as well as by the lighting effects. The lights are all projected from below the stage, creating eerie shadows on the performers' faces. A subtle combination of blue and white light creates, depending on the base color of the costume, a pastel-purple or gray color, as evident in the duet of Jason and Medea.

Mitisek has created a contemporary feel to this production that allows the audience to relate to the characters. This is evident from the first scene, in which Princess Dirce expresses her worries about her future and her maids (two women from the chorus) console her. Instead of a timid and innocent virgin, Ani Maldjian plays Dirce as a spoiled, drunken young woman, who is devastated by being used by her father and future husband as a commodity in a business transaction. Maldjian's Dirce wears purple spandex, a leopard-patterned camisole, and a loose, sheer white blouse, a typical combination that the audience would see on the streets of California. During the scene, she consumes a bottle of wine and a small bottle of prescribed medication while her attendants, played by Ariel Pisturino and Diana Tash, try to soothe her. Between their songs, they insert ad-libs, like "yeah," or "come-on, girl." Although these ad-libs often sound too colloquial or unnecessarily casual, they certainly are able to add "gestus" to the

performance, making the character of Dirce a living human being that the audience can relate to.

In the opening scene, as the orchestra plays the overture, Suzan Hanson exhibits both Medea's rage and her sorrow through her stylized movement. Hanson wears a long, loosely fitted dark gown with a spider web or vine motif on her knitted sleeve as well as on one of her cheeks. The web pattern suggests that Medea is a sorceress. While the orchestra plays a symphonic overture filled with powerful, dramatic repetitions of up/down scales and alternations of minor and major notes, Hanson seductively and sometimes even grotesquely moves her body, including her hands and arms, invoking a dark and ominous atmosphere. Soon after this nonverbal scene, the prologue, which Mitisek and Hanson added by incorporating the lines from a translation of Euripides's *Medea*, begins. In this prologue, the characters of Neris and the Women recite the lines of the great hypothesis such as "If only it had never happened like this/If the Argo hadn't opened its sails and flown" and "If Jason hadn't deserted her for the bed of a Princess."¹³

In the legend of Medea, Medea is the daughter of the king of Colchis, who falls in love with Jason, one of the Argonauts, and betrays her father and brother to help Jason obtain the Golden Fleece that he needs to prove that his is the rightful king. After her betrayal of her own family for Jason, they sail to Corinth and marry and have two sons. In Cherubini's opera, as in many Medea-legend-based plays and operas, the story begins just after Jason abandons Medea for the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth, and Medea receives, from Creon, the edict of exile from Corinth.

Hanson interprets Medea as a powerful but vulnerable woman with complex feelings. Hanson tells the story of Medea's past—when she was young and innocent—simply and believably in intense but beautiful arias. Hanson's clear soprano voice well exhibits her character's human side as a woman who still clings to hope that she will regain her husband and as a mother concerned about the future of her children. Medea's humanity is particularly highlighted when she pleads with Creon to allow her to take her children into exile with her.

With the emphasis on mistreatment of Medea, LBO presents Medea's act of killing of her own children as the desperate act of a woman driven insane by her rage, despair, jealousy, and worries about her children's future. Her last aria painfully yet succinctly portrays the mixture of these emotions, emphasizing Medea as a betrayed wife, a despairing mother, and an exile.

One of the strongest parts of this production is the demonstration of the relationship between Medea and Jason. Ryan MacPherson as a dashing and taciturn Jason in a white dinner jacket, black pants, and loosened tie portrays a man who is torn between his political and personal choices. MacPherson and Hanson exhibit their unbreakable chemistry so intensely during their aria that I could feel the entire audience becoming tense. The electrified connection between him and Medea is amplified by the light cast from below the platform; as the two move around on the four sides of the stage, these lights reflect from their white costumes in lavender, blue, white, and even gray. The changing colors echo their ever-evolving relationship.

The tyrant who orchestrates the political union by a marriage between his daughter and Jason is played by a rather youthful-looking Roberto Gomez as Creon. Gomez interprets the leader of Corinth as a rather stiff yet somehow vulnerable (to Medea) man; at one point, he directly expresses his fear of Medea, who he believes is a force that would threaten the patriarchal world of the Argonauts.

The Overture to Act III, normally played before the curtain rises, illuminates the spoken dialogue of Neris, played by Peabody Southwell, and the Women, who describe the horrible deaths of Dirce and Creon. They describe how the veil and gown, a wedding gift from Medea, flamed up and began to eat Dirce's flesh, and how Creon, crying over his daughter's faceless and shapeless corpse, also had the flesh

torn from his bones. The use of the overture as background music to the description of the behind-the-curtain scene intensifies the horrific deaths of the two characters. Soon after, Medea appears on stage with bloody hands. Hanson emphasizes Medea's "insanity," since she does not seem to remember what she has just done until she finally confesses to Jason, "Your sons, I have killed them." The abrupt, short ending of the opera, with Neris and the two women singing "This should never have happened, If only Jason had been true, Medea never learned to hate," mitigates the blame that the audience usually places on the character of Medea.

This performance of the opera *Medea* by Long Beach Opera underscores that her terrible crimes result from her betrayal and abandonment rather than an inherently evil character. It illuminates the heroine's humanity and vulnerability by treating her as a person trapped by the greed and hatred that infests the community of Corinth. This portrayal of Medea's humanity is, along with the performance's theatricality, the most moving element of the LBO's contemporary interpretation and staging of the eighteenth century classic.

footnotes

¹ <http://www.longbeachopera.org/> Accessed 25 February 2011.

² Since it closed, the empty site of the EXPO Furniture's warehouse has become available for various groups to rent for meetings and events. LBO created and designed the set and the interior space for the production of *Medea*. Doris Koplik (Director of Media Relations, Long Beach Opera), e-mail interview, 14 April 2011.

³ Basil Deane, "Cherubini and opéra-comique," *Opera* 40 (1989):1308.

⁴ Basil Deane, "Cherubini and opéra-comique," *Opera* 40 (1989):1308.

⁵ Basil Deane, "Cherubini and opéra-comique," *Opera* 40 (1989):1310.

⁶ Hoffman wrote a text by barrowing the dramaturgy and interpretations that Pierre Corneille, Jean-Marie-Bernard Clément, and the Baron of Longepierre had employed in their work. Paolo Russo and Mary Ann Smart, "Visions of Medea: Musico-Dramatic Transformations of a Myth," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 6.2 (1994):118.

⁷ Della Couling, "Opera Origins: Medea," *Opera Now* (July/August 2003):43.

⁸ Long Beach Opera always provides supertitles for all of its productions. Andreas Mitisek, phone interview, 23 February 2011.

⁹ J. Wechsberg, "A review of *Médée*," *Opera News* 36 (April 1972):322.

¹⁰ Robert Jacobson, "A review of *Medea*." *Opera News* 47 (July 1982): 31.

¹¹ This transformation is "illusionary," created by the effect of pale-blue light reflected on the stainless steel structures.

¹² Andreas Mitisek, phone interview, 23 February 2011.

¹³ Doris Koplik (Director of Media Relations Long Beach Opera), e-mail interview, 21 April 2011. The lines are from <http://www.longbeachopera.org/2011-season/medea> (site discontinued).