

COMMUNICATIONS



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AMBER YOEUELL (Columbia University) writes:

Hasse and Metastasio's festive opera *Alcide al bivio* (1760), an allegorical battle between virtue and pleasure, might be seen to foreshadow the revolutionary changes in opera instantiated just two years later in Gluck's pivotal *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762). Written to celebrate the wedding of the future Emperor Joseph II, *Alcide al bivio* presents the coming-of-age story of the young Hercules as he decides his destiny. Yet Hasse and Metastasio's composition is an allegory not only about morals, but about opera itself. The state of operatic aesthetics was a source of major debate among composers, librettists and commentators in the mid-eighteenth century. They argued about opera's status as an art form: was it a spectacle of virtuosic entertainment meant to tickle the ears of the audience, filled with endless roudades, ornament and bombast, or was it a serious art form based on ancient Greek tragedy, subjecting music to drama and adhering to Winckelmann's classical ideal of 'noble simplicity'? A new production of this opera, only the second in modern times, that took place at the Italian Academy at Columbia University on 4–5 April 2009 foregrounded the stylistic battle at play through innovative staging that mixed period and modern performance practices.

The music of *Alcide al bivio* exhibits a clear dichotomy between aesthetics of virtue and pleasure, with the trills, Scotch snaps and elegant coloratura of galant composition symbolizing the latter, and fanfares, horn calls and military motives symbolizing the former. In so representing the deceptive goddess of pleasure and the stalwart goddess of virtue, Hasse seems to condemn operatic frivolity and sonic pleasure as decadent and effeminate, while praising more austere operatic writing – a move that presages Gluck's classicizing aesthetics. The production's staging amplified this dichotomy by associating pleasure with stylized acting and effeminacy (at one point Alcide dons makeup and catwalks through the audience) and associating virtue with natural acting styles and masculinity. Yet the aesthetic division between virtue and pleasure becomes increasingly blurred over the course of the opera. Metastasio's libretto is resolved by a synthesis of virtue and pleasure created by the submission of the latter to the former; likewise, Hasse's composition shows the virtue of unabashed musical pleasure when used in the service of moral instruction.

The production was a result of a collaboration between the Columbia University Collegium Musicum and a new campus opera company, OperaRepo, involving graduate students in the Music and Theater Departments at Columbia University. My contribution to the project consisted of creating an edition of the score from a manuscript facsimile and also playing the part of Alcide. The production was conducted by music graduate student Mark Seto, directed by theatre graduate student and Metropolitan Opera assistant director Sarah Meyers, and managed by theatre graduate student Annie Holt. Singers from the Columbia and larger New York community took the remaining roles, with Brett Umlauf as Edonide, Brooke Bryant, a music graduate student at the City University of New York, as Aretea, and Sean Parr, a music graduate student at Columbia, as Fronimo. For more information about the score, production and recording please contact Amber Youell at <aly2101@columbia.edu>.

