

Le cinesi. Libretto by PIETRO METASTASIO, first set by Antonio Caldara (1735 Vienna).

*At the opening [three] rural nymphs are seen sitting together drinking tea in an attitude of total preoccupation. Lisinga, after observing each of her companions for some time, finally breaks the silence.*

Bored, three young Chinese women ponder how they might amuse themselves in a manner that would be enjoyable, innocent, and different. Tangia has fleeting thoughts on the matter but they come to nothing, so Lisinga suggests that as a group, they perform a dramatic piece. All three agree, but in turning to such a European pastime, each one favours a different genre. Lisinga opts for an heroic drama, while Sivene would have a pastoral and Tangia a comedy. Thus Lisinga proposes that each one perform a scene in her preferred style and they will adopt the one they consider to be the best. Since her companions hesitate, Lisinga takes the lead and as Andromache, widow of Hector, plays out a scene in which the life of their child, Astyanax, is threatened by Pyrrhus, unless she agrees to marry him. Much to Tangia's discomfort, Lisinga finishes her scene without resolution, but it is Sivene's turn, and she begins by describing a pastoral scene in which Tirsi, a shepherd, accuses Licori, a shepherdess, of having little love for him. Licori, who promises more love than she intends to give, treats his grief with disdain. Sivene, as Licori, assures Tirsi that he is her first love after her dog and her sheep. She could love him more if he were more enterprising. Meanwhile, he satisfied or both should return to their respective pastures. Tangia, keen to delay her turn, has questions, but Lisinga, keeping matters on track, insists upon the comedy scene. In response, Tangia offers the choice of four different characters she could present, of which Sivene chooses the foppish youth recently returned from foreign lands. Assuming such a role, Tangia presents him touching up his wig at his vanity stand while acknowledging the common folk with condescension and commenting on the crass nature of society youths not schooled in the Tuilleries of Paris, the only source of true irresistible refinement. With the three scenes completed, the style of the united presentation must now be decided. Tragedy is impressive, but crying as a means of enjoyment seems odd. The pastoral is gentle but endless talk of huts and herds becomes tiresome, and comedy, as a demonstration of human foibles, can be offensive to one who identifies with the circumstances. Lisinga provides a way out. Together the group should perform a ballet. All agree, and join in general rejoicing.

*Le cinesi* is Metastasio's first work written to be performed by amateur members of the royal household, their wider aristocratic circle, or by a combination of the two. For such works, particular observances and limitations applied, most of which can be gleaned from letters to Farinelli (18:02:1752) and to his brother, Leopoldo (12:06:1752), written at the time of preparing *L'eroe cinese*. Other sources include the concerns over the performance venue of *La corona*, and from the lessons in courtly behaviour put forward in the poet's teenage drama, *Giustino*. As a light-hearted *componimento drammatico* of the simple *cantata a tre* type prepared for performance in Chinese costume as an introduction to a Chinese ball, *Le cinesi* already satisfied the need for simplicity and brevity, along with engaging an appropriate number of performers costumed elaborately, perhaps, but with due respect for decorum. Archduchess Maria Theresa, at age 17, appeared as Lisinga, the obvious leader, with her sister, Archduchess Maria Anna, then 16, as the compliant Sivene. As for the more ingenuous Tangia, Andrea Sommer-Mathis has recently suggested that this role was probably played by Camilla Fuchs, daughter of Countess Marie Karoline von Fuchs-Mollard, former governess to Maria Theresa and Maria Anna and a subsequent close confidante of the former. Thus, even with such clearly differentiated characters, nobody appeared as a loathsome antagonist and the action demanded nothing excessive by way of dramatic movement or emotional display. The performance took place in the Mirror Room (*Spiegelsaal*) of the *Hofburg* Metastasio directed, and his delight with his responsive performers is recorded in letters to Giuseppe Peroni, Mattia Damiani, and Daniele Florio, all written on 26:02:1735. So successful was the venture that imperial commissions followed for works to be given later the same year by the same performers: *Le grazie vendicate* for the birthday of the Empress in August and *Il palladio conservato* in October for the Emperor's birthday. *Le cinesi* contains comic elements that operate on three levels: in the interaction between the *dramatis personae*, in the unavoidable awareness of the social standing of the performers, and in the comic satire, particularly of the basic characteristics and content of the three Aristotelian genres of tragedy, comedy, and pastorelle (satyric plays) as seen through the eyes of three supposedly non-Europeans. Indeed, the author seems to mimic himself. Lisinga's scene

in heroic style, for example, is a typical act-ending, dilemma situation as expressed in a *scena ed aria* at the end of either Act I or Act II of a Metastasian drama. Furthermore, it is Austria's future empress as Lisinga who, amid the theatrical satire and group interactions, gallantly extols Metastasio's pedagogical function of moving heart and mind towards nobility of thought – and the satire extends further: the Andromache legend was one of the most popular operatic subjects of the time, providing opportunity for a satirical nod, if not in the direction of Euripides, certainly in that of Racine and Zeno. As for the pastoral with its sixteenth-century roots in Italy, in addition to being declared tiresome, Sivene, as Licori, nonchalantly refers to the all too familiar shepherdesses, Silvia and Nice, as potential suppliers of that love for Tirsi that she cannot give herself. Finally, Tangia, whose informality and quick wit provides amusing contrast with her two companions, touches the world of Molière in providing an impersonation of a dandy that Paris alone could produce.

Settings: Caldara (Vienna 1735)