

**La contesa de' numi** ['The Contest of the Gods'] Libretto by PIETRO METASTASIO, first set by Leonardo Vinci (1729, Rome).

On 4 September 1729, Maria Leszczyńska of Poland, consort of Louis XV of France, gave birth to the Dauphin. Since the couple's first three children had been daughters, the securing of the line of succession with the arrival of a male heir was an occasion for particular celebration not only in France but in other cities throughout the catholic world. In Rome, Metastasio and Vinci responded to a commission from the French Ambassador, Cardinal Melchior de Polignac, for a *festa teatrale*.

PART 1 On Mount Olympus, three dieties (Mars, Apollo, and Astrea) and two allegories (Peace and Fortune) argue vehemently. Jupiter demands order. Today, even he will set his thunderbolts aside in order to celebrate the birth of the Dauphin. The offenders explain that this birth is the very reason for their disagreement, since each one aspires to the task of raising the infant. In response, Jupiter bids them explain how they have contributed to the infant's lineage, insisting that none show disdain for the others. Apollo begins. Self-reliant, and with his choir of the muses, he has enlightened the Gallic minds and opened them to the mysteries of ancient Egypt, particularly in astronomy (Urania being one of the muses), and with the theatre arts also well represented within his choir, he has raised the French stage to the level of the ancient Greeks. Acknowledging Apollo as leader, Peace claims to have been the educator, providing conditions not only for creativity in painting, sculpture, and tapestry, but also for the industry that supports them and for irrigation. The stability necessary for such advancement, Mars declares, only came about under the shadow of his war-like shield, his assistance of the merchant ships against the Barbary Pirates and of the crusaders in Jordan, thus even spawning events that served Apollo as material for his poetry. Astrea, goddess of justice, speaks of her retreat to the heavens after the passing of the first golden age and of her return at the behest of the Bourbons to raise the royal children as heroes in the new golden age of Louis XV and his forbears. What Astrea has done for Louis, Fortune believes she has done for the king's consort, especially in aiding visits from Lucina, goddess of childbirth. With each contestant threatening reprisals if not chosen, Jupiter now insists that they describe how they would apply their talents to the infant's education. Meanwhile, let Olympus echo with joyful sounds.

PART 2 Mars would raise a fearsome military hero and oversee his victories. By contrast, Peace would rear a discerning, highly educated monarch of morality and reason, nonviolent and conscious of the lessons to be learned from the past. To these contrasting viewpoints, Fortune and Astrea add more. Fortune sees the task simply as providing constant success, whether in war or in peace. For Astrea, however, the art of ruling requires equanimity, a careful schooling in compassionate but firm and impartial judgment, in self-discipline, and in discovering how, like Hercules, to overcome malice, to shoulder and delegate tasks, and maintain order. Finally, Apollo claims that by acquainting the infant with the illustrious deeds of his forefathers, he will instill in him such a burning desire to emulate them that in time his exploits will also become the subject of his poetry. Jupiter now concludes that the raising of the Dauphin will require the combined talents of the whole company. Thus, while he secures longevity from the Fates and Apollo sets his plan in motion, the opposing forces will counterbalance each other: Peace will modify the ferocity of Mars, and Astrea's stability will restrain Fortune's volatility. To carry out their work, the company must relocate to Versailles.

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Accounts of the events in Rome to celebrate the Dauphin's birth are provided in Francesco Valerio's *Diario di Roma* (entries between 18:11 and 30:11:1729), the Chracas, *Diario Ordinario di Roma* (esp. nos.1920 and 1924, 26:11 and 03:12:1729), and the *Mercure de France* (December 1729, pp.3125-43). Polignac received news of the birth from France on 13 September along with extravagant funding (subsequently personally supplemented) and instructions to mount appropriate celebrations which, given time for the necessary preparations and for the upper clergy and nobility to return from the country, were in place by Friday, November 18, the day following the dress rehearsal of *La contesa*. Kurt Markstrom, points out how the commonality of personnel involved with the *festa* and, soon afterwards, with the premieres of Vinci's *Alessandro nell'Indie* and *Artaserse*, demonstrate how the need to coordinate with programming at the Teatro delle Dame may also have contributed to the delay (see *The Operas of Leonardo Vinci, Napoletano*, pp.278-87). Giovanni Carestini, for example, who sang the role of Jupiter in *La contesa*, also appeared as Poro in *Alessandro*

and Arbace in *Artaserse*. It was intended that *La contesa* be performed on Monday, November 21 in the magnificent open-air courtyard of the ambassador's residence at the Palazzo Altemps on the Piazza di Sant' Apollinare, just north of the Piazza Navona (now the Museo Nazionale Romano). Although a solemn mass with *Te Deum* was celebrated the previous day at the Chiesa di San Luigi dei Francesi, the *fiesta* performance was postponed until November 26 because of persistent heavy rain that also interrupted other activities, including the horse races on the Corso and fireworks in the Piazza Navona, fitted out to recall its earlier function as the *Circo Agonale* (Contest Arena). As its title implies, the notion of competition is fundamental to the Metastasio/Vinci *fiesta*. Already present in Part 1 of the previous year's *Festività del Santo Natale* (q.v.), conflict through rivalry expands in *La contesa* across the entire piece, a procedure Metastasio was to continue in subsequent works of this type written for the Viennese court to which he had recently accepted the offer of employment. In keeping with other offerings for the occasion, Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, as Protector of the French Crown, contributed a three-act *fiesta teatrale* of his own. With the title, *Carlo Magno*, and in a setting by Giovanni Costantini, a composer in Ottoboni's employ, this work opened at the *Cancellaria* on November 24, two days ahead of *La contesa* at the Palazzo Altemps. Beyond Vinci's setting of the *fiesta* for Rome, Gluck set it as part of the celebrations surrounding the birth of the future Christian VII of Denmark in 1749. For this event, Thomas Clitau, a leading poet of the time, appropriately replaced the gallic associations in the text with references to Denmark and the House of Oldenburg.

**Settings:**

Vinci (Rome 1729); Gluck (Copenhagen 1749).