

La corona. Libretto by PIETRO METASTASIO, first set by Christoph Willibald Gluck (1765, Vienna).

*To the right, the exterior of a grand but rustic royal hunting lodge, set on high ground and close to a forest. Overgrown ancient ruins are to the left. On the same side, a little further back, a small consecrated temple to Diana with a statue of the goddess that holds a laurel wreath in its right hand. The remainder of the scene, as far as the eye can see, depicts the immensity of the vast Caledonian forest.*

Atalanta is bent on victory over the wild boar in the Calydonian forest and so winning the laurel wreath from the hand of Diana.. Both her younger sister, Climene, and her friend, Asteria, sister of Meleagro, insist, however, on sharing the danger with her. Atalanta, believing Climene to be more inclined to erudition than to hunting and Asteria more equipped for a deer hunt than the pursuit of a wild boar, claims that her concern for their safety would hinder her own prowess. She therefore entreats Meleagro, who has made a timely entrance, to resolve this contest of honour. His reply provides a veiled encomium to the three younger Archduchesses in contending that, as treasures of Greece and all other nations, they must all step back from such danger. At least the action can be observed, and Climene hastens towards a watchtower, bidding Atalanta to follow her. Atalanta, however, is detained by concern for Asteria who feels disinclined to watch valour in others when denied the opportunity to engage in it herself. Hearing the sounds of the huntsmen, however, Asteria rushes into the forest in their direction, leaving Atalanta no choice but to follow. Climene returns, calling upon other companions to bring her a weapon, her pursuit into the forest stopped by the reappearance of Asteria, uninjured, but weaponless. Suddenly, Atlanta, calling for a weapon which she gladly takes from Climene before rushing back into the forest. Almost immediately Meleagro cries out that Atlanta has killed the boar. When Atalanta contradicts him he explains that either her first blow killed it outright or he merely completed the act. Thus as Atlanta and Meleagro insist that the laurel wreath belongs to the other, all four join in a humble homage to the goddess.

Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses* (Book 8, 260-525), provides an extensive account of Atalanta and Meleagro's slaying of the Calydonian Boar, placed in the forest of Calydon in Aetolia by the goddess Diana as punishment for a slight on the part Oeneus, king of that region. Metastasio forwarded his libretto based on this story to a court official on 29 April, 1765. Although not identified in the accompanying letter, the recipient would have been Count Johann Wenzel Sporck, Director of the Imperial Theatres, as suggested by Gehard Croll, in his "Vorwort" to his edition of *La corona* for the Gluck *Gesamtausgabe* (1974). Maria Theresa, had commissioned the work for performance on October 4, the name day of her consort, the Emperor Francis I, and following the success of *Il Parnaso confuso* (q.v.), the text would again be set by Gluck for performance by the same four Archduchesses. For Metastasio, 1765 was a year of royal weddings. By the end of April, both *Parnaso confuso* and *Il trionfo d'Amore* (q.v.) had been prepared in haste for that of Archduke Joseph, with the opera *Romola ed Ersilia* still to come for the wedding in Innsbruck of Archduke Leopold in early August, followed by the festa teatrale, *La pace fra le tre dee* (q.v.) for the wedding in Segovia/Madrid of the future Charles IV of Spain in early September. Within this tight schedule, plans moved ahead for *La corona* in which the Archduchesses Maria Elisabeth and Maria Amalia were to play the roles of Meleagro and Atlanta respectively, with Maria Josepha as Climene and Maria Carolina as Asteria. It seems the Empress must have suggested the theatre at Schönbrunn as a performance venue because the content of the aforementioned letter, and a memorandum (cited by Croll) written by Metastasio's close friend, Baron Johann von Hagen, the emperor's privy counsellor, provide explanations as to why the smaller Hall of Ceremonies (former *Schlachtensaal*) where *Parnaso confuso* was given would be more suitable. Particularly significant are references to problems with the size and acoustics of the theatre that could render the voices of the performers inaudible and, from Metastasio's point of view, the exaggerated gesture required for the larger space would not only mar the finesse of the natural movement of the Archduchesses, but would also be quite unbecoming. As is clear from the context, Metastasio's aim was to portray an image of four gracious sisters who would, by nature, be equals in gallantry. Sadly, the Emperor died in Innsbruck on August 18 and *La corona* remained unperformed.

Settings:

Gluck (unperf., comp. 1765); De Mora (? 1815)