

Il Parnaso confuso [Parnassus Confused]. Libretto by PIETRO METASTASIO, first set by Christoph Willibald Gluck (1765, Vienna).

The scene represents the sacred wood that shades the slopes of Mount Parnassus. The green of the thick laurel of which it is composed is enlivened by the delightful colours of the interposing flowering bushes that lightly subdivide it. In the distance to the right is seen part of [Mount Helicon] with Pegasus at the top, under whose feet gush the waters of the Hippocrene spring which, falling along different courses, collects on the plane, and through the openings it leaves where the forest is less dense, can be seen, in the distance on the left, the pleasant countryside of Phocis.

At the outset, the three muses, Melpomene [muse of tragedy], Euterpe [muse of lyric poetry and flute playing] and Erato [muse of love poetry] are seated on randomly placed rocks that are covered in moss and ivy. Some of their companions are in the distance and all are in idle attitudes. On one side, a lyre hangs from a laurel; on the other side, a flute lies on an uneven stone.

The scene opens during the sweet and slow conclusion of the overture, adapted to the peaceful situation of the Muses. After a few moments, however, sudden changes in both sound and tempo announce and accompany the cheerful and hasty arrival of Apollo.

Apollo rouses the Muses with a call to duty: Joseph and Josepha are to be wed and they must inspire appropriate celebrations. All are quick to oblige, but are equally hasty to renege when Apollo announces that the wedding is to take place the following day. He assures each one that she is up to the task: Melpomene has moved hearts on the stages of Athens, Euterpe has heightened the power of Amphion's songs in Thebes, and Erato has invigorated the odes of old Anacreon with visions of youth. With further assurance that all can be accomplished without his help, Apollo leaves to urge both Thalia (muse of comedy) and Terpsichore (muse of dance) into action. Left alone, it is Melpomene who still harbours doubts and so retires into the forest to contemplate. Erato, the youngest and, therefore, the most playful of the Muses, instigates a littler contest whereby she sings of love accompanying herself with Euterpe's lyre, then offers her flute to Euterpe, challenging her to do likewise. Euterpe, however, barely completes her opening *ritornello* when Melpomene rushes in, desperate for advice. An amusing satire then follows as the younger muses respond. Melpomene has already overdone the story of Peleus and Thetis, and that of Hercules and Hebe is sterile. Furthermore, the Eros and Psyche myth is simply unbelievable. Melpomene, therefore, returns to the forest to ponder something simpler and happier and Euterpe completes her interrupted song. United through their ability to play each other's instruments, the two young muses decide upon a united effort and are in the process of finding a theme when Apollo returns demanding that they follow him directly to the Istra (i.e. the Danube) because the wedding has already taken place. All three Muses express shame and alarm, particularly Melpomene who would hide herself on a distant shore. Apollo, however, declares them blameless, insisting now that it is their very sincerity which must be taken to the Danube in the company of a multitude of deities and allegorical figures. The love expressed between bride and groom will restore their confidence.

Although Gluck set thirteen of Metastasio's *drammi* (*Ezio* in two versions), the court poet wrote only two stage works specifically for him: the twin pieces *Il Parnaso confuso*, and *La corona* (q.v.). Both are *azioni teatrali*, written in 1765 for performance by the same four Archduchesses in what is now the Hall of Ceremonies at Schönbrunn. Sadly, *La corona* remained unperformed owing to the death of Emperor Francis I for whose name-day it was written. *Il Parnaso*, however, served as part of the celebrations in Vienna surrounding the wedding, on 23 January 1765, of Archduke Joseph, and Maria Josepha of Bavaria, and was performed the following evening. The two older archduchesses, Maria Elisabeth (21) and Maria Amalia (18) played the roles of Melpomene and Apollo respectively, their younger sisters, Maria Josepha (13) and Maria Carolina (12) appearing as Euterpe and Erato. Each one had a similar role in *La corona* where the number and allocation of arias also remained the same. In spite of such similarities, Metastasio deemed *Il Parnaso* a *festa teatrale* in the Hérissant edition, a designation that seems to have come about not because of the form, content and delivery of the work itself but because of an additional and complementary attachment. With Archduke Leopold (17) continuing to conduct from the harpsichord, the *azione* was followed by the ballet-pantomime, *Le triomphe de l'Amour*, choreographed by Franz Hilverding to the music of Florian Gassmann and danced by the

Archdukes Ferdinand (10) and Maximilian (8) and the Archduchess Maria Antonia (9). Surely, it was the combined package involving eight members of the royal household that Metastasio considered a *festa teatrale*. His wedding *festa teatrale*, *Il trionfo d'Amore*, (q.v.) with music by Florian Gaßmann, was performed at Schönbrunn by members of the Hof-Musikkapelle on January 25 – a reworking of *L'asilo d'Amore* (q.v.) from 1732.

Only five weeks intervened between the imperial commission for *Il Parnaso* and the performance, a situation Metastasio aptly paralleled in the plot. The performers bear mythological names, but their action and anxieties are quite human, made more amusing by their relationship as sisters and their true social standing. Gods behaving like mortals is by no means a first in Metastasio's occasional pieces, and as became clear in his objections to the notion that *La corona* be staged in the larger Schönbrunn theatre, naturalness of expression within an intimate performance venue was a quality he prized. This proximity to the so-called "reformist" ideals of the time emerged readily out of his experience and sensitivity to the situation, achieved while still as stage director, ensuring a demeanour appropriate to the public image of members of the imperial household. The need to coordinate stage action with the end of the overture and with the interruption to the Euterpe aria would also point to coordination between poet/stage director and composer, even if, as Dr. Burney suggested, the former was more inclined towards Hasse's clear expression of what is "graceful, elegant, and tender" than to the "boisterous and violent expression" associated with Gluck (*An Eighteenth-Century Musical Tour . . .* (1959), 2: 81, 120). *Il Parnaso* offered no such opportunities for the composer who nonetheless provided ample opportunity for the performers to demonstrate the high level of their musical ability, particularly for the two older sisters to whom Metastasio attributed much of the success of the entire enterprise.

Settings: Gluck (Vienna 1765); Rust (Salzburg 1778).