

L'asilo d'Amore ['Cupid's Sanctuary'] Libretto by PIETRO METASTASIO, first set by Antonio Caldara (1732, Vienna).

*PROLOGUE Fishing nets and traps lie about on the moss covered rocks in a dimly lit cave deep in the rocky shore of Cyprus, Cupid, dressed as a fisherman, without wings, bow, quiver, or blindfold, responds to the concerns of Venus, his anxious mother.*

Since he is a child, aspects of Cupid's irresponsible behaviour have been tolerated by mortals, but now, contrary to his mother's explicit instructions, he has disturbed the gods from whose anger he must hide. Venus, declaring his fisherman's disguise ineffective, suggests three groups among whom he could mingle, all of which her son declares unsuitable. In his presence young girls show behavioural extremes, young men either complain or become arrogant, and old men lose their composure. Such conduct would betray him. With other plans in mind, he therefore bids Venus meet the angered gods, denounce his crimes, but keep his assailants at bay.

*The scene, although remaining by the Cyprus shores, moves to the Palace of Venus where the ornaments, statues, and bas-reliefs illustrate love stories connected with the goddess and her son. In the clouds above the palace, Venus rides in her dove-drawn shell to meet the chariots of Apollo, Mars, Pallas, and Mercury. Among the Graces and Cupids who attend Venus are the Genii who serve the other gods.*

Three sections follow, the first two framed by the chorus of Genii who call for Cupid's downfall with added allegations from the four attendant gods who sing, at first in duet and finally in chorus. The third section is similarly framed, but with the previous anger of chorus and gods finally appeased. Section one, begins with the deities questioning the hope of maidens and the loyalty of lovers to such a cruel and fickle god as Cupid. At the suggestion of Venus, they agree to await his return, although Pallas sends her Genii in search of him, advising them not to look in places of repose but in hearts of deceit or grief. Venus, claiming her own anger to be already awakened, invites her companions to enrage her further with their grievances. Mercury, who has already insisted on Cupid justifying his crimes before Jupiter, adds that the youngster insults the gods and tyrannizes mortals, stealing the attention of those with potential genius, destroying the power of intuitive communication, and teaching nothing to careless youth. Mars, who sees Cupid as the poison of every heart, complains that he sways the heavens and the earth as he likes, and having dared to enter the army, wounds some warriors and inflames others, degrading valour in warfare to a quivering before physical beauty, love letter writing, and the carving of initials on tress. Mars wants revenge. For Apollo, Cupid's crimes mount daily. He has taken Apollo's lyre, and in his hands it no longer inspires the noble minded with the deeds of gods and heroes, but promotes idleness and sloth. On Mount Helicon, Cupid has adversely affected the behaviour of the muses and reduced Apollo to the level of an attendant. Finally, Pallas declares that Cupid puts the entire universe in disarray. He has robbed all the gods of aspects of their powers and the multiplicity of his guises threatens the sagacity of the ancient council and other wise men. Gods and Genii alike call for the end of the cruelty and deceit of this god who promises happiness but creates turmoil

Venus agrees that anger is justified, but claims Cupid's gifts to be agents of solace, peace, and virtue, only becoming sources of folly and confusion in the hands of his foolish followers. Anticipating the final outcome, she suggests that Cupid, a child, simply requires a skilled tutor. Each god in turn now responds to her suggestions of Time, Disdain, Labour, and Reason. For Apollo, Time would not only provide the conditions for a minor fault to grow into a major problem, but would also allow a wrong action to become an implanted habit. Mars objects to Disdain, because it can readily become too close a companion to Love. Mercury, who well understands Labour, points out how easily Love can draw the most active heroes into idleness, citing as examples the encounters of Achilles with Briseis and Hercules with Omfale. Finally, Pallas dismisses Reason as a language a child will neither understand nor follow blindly, questioning, at the same time, the effectiveness of Cupid's blindfold. Such defeat forces Venus into a final defence of her son, but to no avail; gods and Genii remain united against him.

*The waves now rise with the sound of these last complaints, then subside to reveal Proteus in his chariot of shells and coral pulled by sea*

*horses. Nereids and Tritons follow, rising out of the water as they approach the shore.*

To the delight of the vengeful gods, Proteus announces that Cupid has been found. For Venus, her anxiety rises in proportion to the retribution demanded by the other gods until Proteus declares that Cupid, encircled by virtues, has changed his ways. He has sought refuge in the person of Elisa (the Empress Elisabeth Christine) in whom all virtues coalesce. All unite in song and dance to celebrate the day of Elisa's birth.

DON NEVILLE, JOSEPH RAFFA

*L'asilo d'Amore* was premiered in a sumptuous performance mounted in the Hauptplatz, Linz, on 28 August, 1732, to honour the birthday of Elisabeth Christine, consort to the Emperor Charles VI., both royals temporarily resident at the palace there, along with members the Imperial court, to receive the homage of Upper Austria in its capital city. The spectacle, mounting as it does towards the final encomium, was realized by Giuseppe Galli-Bibiena, the Emperor's First Theatrical Engineer. Of the singers, soprano, Theresa Holzhauser, married the previous year to Georg Reutter, sang the role of Venus, and her youngest brother, Domenico, may well have been the Signor Holzhauser who played Cupid. The soprano castrato, Domenico Genovesi appeared as Mercury, alto castrato, Gaetano Orsini as Apollo, soprano, Barbara Pisani, as Pallas, bass, Christoph Praun, as Mars, and tenor, Gaetano Borghi as Proteus. The work as a whole reflects two central issues of Cartesian moral philosophy, issues that recall *Giustino* (q.v.), Metastasio's teenage drama written just two years after studying Cartesian philosophy with Gregorio Caloprese. Passions/emotions are not bad in themselves; virtue/morality lies in the extent to which one's reason is able to control the actions that these passions may incite. In *Giustino*, the moral weakness and immaturity revealed in the love-incited rash actions of Justin and Sophie are contrasted with the moral strength of their elders, particularly with that of the sooth-sayer, Cleon, who literally saves their lives. At the centre of *L'asilo*, Venus declares Cupid's gifts to be sources of folly only in the hands of the foolish – that is, in the hands of the morally weak or immature. Elisa, on the other hand, has so perfected virtue/morality (reason over acts ignited by passion) that she provides a model of moral strength that others, including the young Cupid, strive to follow. Ludovico Muratori praised Metastasio's freshness of approach and the light-handed way he delivers the moral message, even to the touch of humour in the listing of Cupid's possible hiding places. With the encomium confined to the end of the piece, *L'asilo* could be readily adapted to celebrate other royal occasions, not least among which is Metastasio's own adaptation performed in 1765 as *Il trionfo d'Amore* (q.v.).

Settings:

Caldara (Linz 1732); Paganelli (Brunswick 1737); Pescetti (London 1739); Hasse (Hubertusberg 1743 – comp. 1742 for Naples); Comp. unknown (Vienna 1743); Courselle (Madrid 1750); Jommelli (Stuttgart 1758); Sarti (Copenhagen 1769, rev. Deschamps as *L'asile del'amour*); P.A. Skokov (? 1787); Schicht (? 1789)