

MUSIC REVIEW : ‘Armide’ a visual, musical delight

Glimmerglass, company from Toronto collaborate on French Baroque opera

BY GERALDINE FREEDMAN

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COOPERSTOWN — Glimmerglass Opera’s production of Jean-Baptiste Lully’s 1686 opera “Armide,” which opened Saturday night, is a splendid affair. It is also the first time the company has presented a French Baroque opera, and this one was a co-production of the excellent Opera Atelier of Toronto, which provided several key personnel that made all the difference.

The sets designed by Gerard Gauci, the Atelier’s resident designer since 1986, were a visual dream that were more like oil paintings. Because the libretto by Philippe Quinault is set during the First Crusade, Gauci blended Arabic calligraphy and exotic Muslim sentiments into sumptuous scrim, panels and backdrops. Bonnie Beecher lit everything with vivid yet evocative care. Costumes by Dora d’Eye were in a rainbow of colors in lustrous fabrics. There were many, many set and costume changes to excite and enchant the eye. Director Marshall Pynkoski made sure the singers and dancers hustled and blocked with interesting shapes.

Because there was much fantasy in this plot with the gods of hate and love and their minions being called, the capacity audience got to see the fires of hell with stage smoke, rumbling thunder and bursts of lightning. Hate had a leotard-like costume with flames, and love had the most incredible wings. Sparkles from on high drifted down.

The entire opera had all the makings of what made Louis XIV’s court thrill with excitement. And all this was just to provide the framework for some fabulous singing and dancing. The styles are different from what most have seen and heard before.

RAW EMOTIONALISM

The singers sing arias that are more like sung dialogue with gently arched lines, not tuneful moments. These are long and require each singer to act up a storm with strong gestures that depict a raw emotionalism. Soprano Peggy Kriha Dye as the Muslim warrior princess Armide and her star-crossed lover, tenor Colin Ainsworth as Renaud, a Christian knight, made you believe their anguish, their bliss. Baritone João Fernandes as Armide’s uncle and sorcerer commanded with his big voice and stalwart presence. Several from the company’s young artist program shone, including soprano Meghan Lindsay, tenor Aaron Ferguson and baritone Vasil Garvanliev. Everyone’s French diction was immaculate. English supertitles were richly explanatory.

The chorus, which sang from the balcony, was solid. The opposite balcony was often used for a soloist’s soliloquy. And the eight men and eight women who danced in French baroque style were expert and light. Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg’s choreography explored these early ballet steps of little turns, jumps, a few rond de jambs in the air and battements. Dancing, which was something Louis favored, was

always a big part of his court's entertainments and in this opera they took up a large slice of the action.

David Fallis, Atelier's music director, conducted a strong string orchestra, which was using Baroque bows and playing in Baroque style. This was supplemented with a sixmember continuo group. The music was very lively yet delicate and often quietly supportive. Fallis maintained exceptional pace during the two acts over the two-plus hours.

The seven other "Armide" performances are July 29, 31, Aug. 5, 10, 13, 18, and 23.