

## A Singer's Notes 53: Lully's *Armide* at Glimmerglass

by KEITH KIBLER • AUGUST 9, 2012 •



*Jack Rennie as Love with Peggy Kriha Dye as Armide and Curtis Sullivan as Hatred in The Glimmerglass Festival/Opera Atelier production of Armide. Photo Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival.*

Marshall Pynkoski's direction of Lully's *Armide* at Glimmerglass was a beautiful and unpretentious thing. It was also limited by the demands of a repertory opera house. The production trod a middle ground stylistically, using by necessity young conservatory-trained singers, the best that we have. This made for heavy going in the choral sections. The orchestral playing as well began with some detail and point, but changed slowly into a kind of general approximation of what standard Baroque practice is thought to be. Orchestral texture in this style is of the greatest importance, especially the continuo group. I would be looking for much more variety and also more stillness where the silences carry the words forward.

The singing was consistently good. Smaller parts, also taken by younger artists, were sung with a secure technique that could not be faulted, but too often the sound itself was relentlessly consistent. It was singing first, words later. It is essential in this style that the words are what first strikes the ear and what maintains the pace of the sung phrase. The illusion that the singer is speaking is an absolute necessity. Peggy Kriha Dye, *Armide*, had mastered this. Colin Ainsworth as *Renaud* and Olivier Laquerre in his roles also did this well. William Christie said that the first thing he tells his 17th century French opera students is not to sing. In fact, he forbids their singing; recitation must come first. Declamation is the center of how these pieces work. I remember well hearing his consort for the first time in Boston, noticing immediately that the texture of the singing was

different from anything I had ever heard. It was manifestly a speaking. This method moves a long scene of what we call recitative move fleetly, thrillingly on the stage. Ms. Dye particularly in the scene where she intends to kill the hero was in splendid command of this kind of elevated pace. She took time between phrases, her voice made many different kinds of sound, her vocalization did not have one weight only. Also, so important in this style, her gesture often led her speech, not the other way around.

This style of opera is also constantly interrupted by dances. Why are they there? Usually an attempt is made to connect the danced scenes with what has been sung or, occasionally, to radically disconnect them. Glimmerglass's production did some of both. This was well done. Clearly the choreography was stylistically aware and responsive, but very occasionally some of the movement looked virtuosic in a 19th century way. This did not happen often. I also got the sense from the splendid variety of dancing in the production that some element of these scenes contained a kind of hubris that was much more about the imagined 17th century listeners. We were contextualized you might say, and this gave me joy. We were Louis XIV, or Mr. Lully himself, who had eliminated, maybe we should say vaporized, all of his competition. The dances came out to us and made us feel the buoyancy and lift that these masters of the universe must have felt.

All of the above is to say that this production had sincerity and detail. There was no excess; nothing was fussy. The tableaux which appeared behind the screen did make the production seem like opening a magic book, as promised in the program. The simplicity with which the scenes were staged showed an honest trust of the material which I really appreciated.

If you want to investigate further, there is a new DVD series of French 17th century operas coming out on the FRAMusica label. I have watched *Atys* with great pleasure, particularly the performances of the great Stephanie d'Oustrac as Cybèle and conductor William Christie.



*Peggy Kriha Dye as Armide and Jack Rennie as Love in The Glimmerglass Festival/Opera Atelier production of Armide.  
Photo: William M. Brown/The Glimmerglass Festival.*