Cleaning Ladies, endlessly exercising their charms

# La Calisto

## Longborough Festival Opera 2019

****

**Longborough Festival Opera 2019 staging of Francesco Cavalli's *La Calisto* (Venice, 1651) was tongue-in-cheek, droll, quirky and sardonic.**

There are two particular justifications: first, opera of Cavalli's time, and the high baroque period that followed, was much inclined to intersperse wry comedy even into what are essentially serious plots (a classic example is Monteverdi's Poppea's bass nurse Arnalta); and secondly, because it gives proof that Longborough, sometimes avoiding the obvious, is unafraid to offer its audience teasing, experimental work.

Perhaps the weakness here was that the send-up was continuous. But there is nothing po-faced about this impish, sprightly, shockingly successful company. And despite the gamble, it still unerringly draws audiences. It has its followers. The comfy auditorium was choc-a-bloc, and the clapping heartfelt and loud.

Longborough, after tentative – but instantly imaginative and daring - Midland beginnings in a Cotswold barn near Stow on the Wold, Gloucestershire, has now been miraculously and indeed beautifully transformed with auditorium seating, boxes, a huge orchestra pit and ample stage. Martin Graham has plans, he says, to extend upward (more boxes, rehearsal rooms) and to build new, accommodating changing areas for the casts.

Longborough has demonstrated from the outset a determined vigour and a marvellous staying power. Its Wagner stagings – the *Ring* interspersed with; memorably, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Tannhäuser*, masterminded by conductor Anthony Negus, have time and again ensured exciting new life among festival productions in the U.K. In the Wagner centenary (2013) it was the only set-up to stage the controversial composer's complete *Das Ring der Nibelungen* cycle.

This animated festival has since its inception *embarked* upon several sets of the entire *Das Ring der Nibelungen* cycle – a passion of its founders, Martin and Lizzie Graham - a new one has been freshly launched this summer. It's a Longborough tradition: the first toe in the water, in 1998, was a *Rheingold* which, using cleverly abbreviated surtitles, like mental signposts, was unforgettable (the ensuing *Die Walküre* introduced Jenny Miller, who this year directed *Anna Bolena*, as Brünnhilde). The second cycle (with initially Sir Donald McIntyre as Wotan), begun in 2008, built to the full *Ring* in the anniversary year. This season's new *Rheingold* has already wowed the critics, who know full well what riches Longborough has long ago unveiled.

This year's *La Calisto* formed part of Longborough's Young (or Emerging) Artists programme and was the tenth fully staged production by the youthful, always prodigiously talented company since 2006, when a toe in the water featured a children's cast in Britten's *The Little Sweep*.

Since then, it's been mainly college-age performers. It has been described, rather nicely, as Longborough's 'end of term treat': it is certainly that. Hundreds of singers in their late teens and twenties have applied to join. These Young Artists, stylishly directed, and thoughtfully coached and mentored, have twice ventured into popular works (*Les Misérables*, *Sweeney Todd*).

**Jupiter (Felix Kemp), Mercury (Neil Balfour) stalk their intended victim Calisto (Chiara Vinci)**

Three Handel have been staged, with first promising and subsequently staggering high standards. And in 2008 they mounted Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, an opera set in the Emperor Nero's fitful reign with a large cast (which helps) and a fusion of the deadly dangerous with ironic unforced humour, which they revisited, bringing startling gifts to bear, in 2018.

*La Calisto* is very much in the same musical idiom as Monteverdi. Its libretto, by Cavalli's long-term librettist, Giovanni Faustini, invites a send-up production, though possibly not so much as here, for the myth it recounts is plainly - like Adonis and Diana, Daphnis and Chloe, Cupid and Psyche - of great sweetness and beauty.

We began with a stage strewn with bric-a-brac – fox, snake, panda and a lot of trite additions – few of which have a bearing later on. To some extent that spillage continued through the opera. From the start we encounter three abstract or allegorical characters – Nature, Destiny and Eternity - whose role is not unlike the three sparring figures opening *Poppea* (Fortune, Virtue and Cupid or Love). Their singing – separately or as a trio – was pretty pleasing; but the persistent louche smoking of Destiny (Lizzie Holmes) grew wearisome: a classic instance of why a joke (as any comic knows) should never be over-repeated.

These three were dressed (in glaring orange) as cleaning ladies mopping up, and a lot of spurious sweeping took place. The idea is not new, and while it was an amusing diversion, it did just that – diverted; it somehow served as a comment, or at least background to what could have been a somewhat bare stage; likewise it perhaps provided useful movement where the opera expounded relatively little. Were they some sort of critique, or commentary, on the action? If so, it was difficult to make out.

**Diana (Sophie Goldrick), the commanding Goddess of Hunting, the Moon and Chastity, with (rear) the besotted Calisto (Chiara Vinci)**

The two male Gods – here Giove (Jupiter) and his fleet message-bearing son Mercurio (Mercury, without winged sandals) soon get up to their antics – the purpose being to seduce the naïve and innocent Calisto; but central to the plot from then on is Diana, goddess of chastity, hunting and the moon.

Essentially for this opera's purposes Diana is Jupiter in disguise – a wheeze cooked up by Mercury (it works) to enable Jove to woo Calisto. Calisto, who has sworn chastity and become a follower of Diana, falls in love with 'her'; a 'forbidden passion', maybe bold – though not necessarily - for a new opera in 1651. We thus find the perfect example of what the notes suggest is 'an allegorical exploration of different kinds of love' – the pure and platonic, the carnal and lustful, the abusive, same gender, the tender, the aspired to (as per the real Diana's adoration of the hapless shepherd Endymion), and so on. Sophie Goldrick, a mezzo of both power and attractiveness, cut a substantial figure onstage: to a degree, domineering, with an edge to the voice when she casts Calisto out – but also capable of something more subdued and affecting.

Calisto herself, cavorting about in the same navy-amber gear as 'Diana' and the potentially errant Linfea (Emma Charles), was a charming presence, partly because Chiara Vinci and the Director managed to explore various ways of making her both innocent and passionate, yearning and sensual, yet also increasingly assured. Vinci produced a delicious sound: not, perhaps, as impressive as Goldrick's Diana, but delightfully enraptured and an eager acolyte.

Her encounters with Diana ('I beg you, do not share your ruby lips with anyone but me'), although legitimised as really with the disguised Jupiter, were fervent and enraptured, so that the Lesbian aspect – ardent, burning, impassioned – which consumes Calisto was in no way skirted or dodged. The result was some pretty fervid amorous encounters, of a kind which brought the audience genuinely sexy frissons.

**The lonely, distressed Endymion (Brian McAlea) clings wanly on to a suckling rubbery sheep from his tender flock**

The music, under conductor (and harpsichordist) Lesley Anne Sammons, was not just utterly professional but gloriously first-rate too. Sammons' control (from keyboard) of the compact nine-strong forces was exemplary, but what interested was the instrumentation forces deployed. One might have judged it inappropriate for Cavalli, but in fact – with the smallish forces believed to figure in certain eras of baroque music – one or two expressive recorders (and entrancing clarinet – not heard of for another century), played enchantingly and often lullingly, including one especially beguiling passage for recorder and bass; harpsichord and 'keyboard', the latter producing some pretty intriguing sounds; an accordion, especially providing (with double bass) some alluring, occasionally staggeringly coloured, lower noises; and briefly, an electric guitar.

What a hash one might have feared or even expected. But no, every sound verged on the inspired, so gifted was this arrangement. At the same time, Tim Mitchell, whose credits include straight opera (as here), Musicals galore, and several RSC productions, covered the stage with a wealth of shifting lighting colours, and detailed semi-spots. A bit dark sometimes, but it all added to the atmosphere, and the whole – it could be claimed - mostly worked.

It leaves us with the men. Felix Kemp played Jupiter with a cheerfully eager appetite, and clad in a sparkling (as it were) smoking jacket, brought to bear a secure, well produced voice: pliant and self-confident, that occasionally soared to pleasing effect. And like Jupiter in Semele, he's scintillatingly besotted: 'I have never seen such radiant eyes' where he is joined by the wondrous nursing clarinet. Neil Balfour, blue suited, made Mercury a suitably rascally and froticsome entrepreneur, hurtling about (as wing footed Mercury must) so as to act as fixer for his randy papa.; but the voice – bass-baritone – was essentially secure, and some of the mischief and irrepressible ingenuity showed through it.

**Horned Pan (James Gribble) and his two ropy acolytes Sylvano (William Stevens, the leafy one) and Satirino (Gabriel Seawright)**

The unexpectedly impish rural trio of Pan (God of the Wild'), Satirino and Sylvano flourished in their bizarre gear (goats' horns, and a spectacularly crazy tree or bush attire for the last, whose bass voice provided one of the most entertaining details of this staging. Pan (James Gribble) had one glorious aria; Satirino capably stirred up the malicious plotting. But William Stevens, currently Royal Welsh College, despite a small vocal role served up some of the most satisfying singing of the evening: a rich and resonant voice, which surely has huge potential on the English opera stage.

The remaining male character is the shepherd Endymion (Brian McAlea), played here as a beautifully shy, tender hearted, apprehensive character who has no concept of his own surpassing beauty or that he could be the subject of love (he is beloved by the Moon, i.e. Diana or Selene); he is boyish, innocent, and soporific – in one version of the myth he is granted the boon of everlasting sleep. Endymion is an innocent, surrounded by (actually attached to) a hilarious flock of transparent balloon sheep. McAlea discovered a high degree of pathos, a limp, tragic figure, devoted to is flock and with little understanding of life – he is mercilessly assailed and tied up by Pan and his brutal lackey Saturino - or love. McAlea's was a gorgeous, touching performance, and with a beautiful voice wedded it would be difficult to imagine Endymion being better captured.

Best of the singing, however, outshining even the strong and forceful Diana, came from Zita Syme as Giunone (Juno): She is pretty electrifying – she could indeed sing the fiery Elettra in *Idomeneo*. Syme had everything the Queen of the Gods needs: simmering anger at Jupiter's continuing infidelities, and his willingness to disport them; consequent jealousy, and a harrowing suspicion; a measure of bitchiness and spite; and a degree of feminine anguish at being thus jilted.

Syme has an exciting voice, which cuts through the strong accompaniment and makes clear who is actually dominant and ultimately wears the trousers. Here was an award-winning young singer whose voice sounded impressively mature, whose diction was excellent, whose stage presence, even when painfully distanced from all the others - another good directing idea – in a glaring red outfit was strikingly forceful, with a notably rich tone and full of contrasting colours. Age and childbearing may have caught up with Juno, but she is still glamorous. She intends to keep her man, and anyone – like Calisto – who gets in the way will have a hard time.

So, some reservations, but a fair amount of acclaim too. The important thing is that Longborough's Young Artists scheme is up and running, and achieving a great deal for what is, over the years, a considerable number of promising student age singers. This enabling scheme has become one of the most important in the country: another feather, like its ongoing Wagner, in this enterprising company's cap. Long may it run.

**Roderic Dunnett**

07-19