Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams

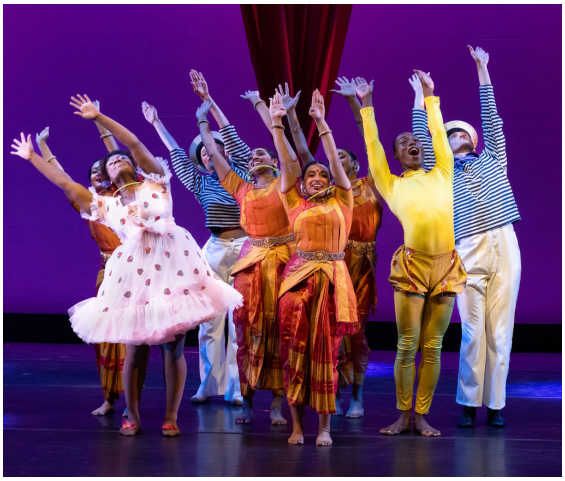
Opera Lafayette's Enterprising Spring Festival, 2024

"The Era of Madame de Maintenon"

With its annual spring festival in New York City, Opera Lafayette sucessfully concluded its ambitious three-year venture to examine various facets of 18th century French music, featuring the eras of three influential patrons of the arts, in reverse chronological order. First, in 2022 it focused on "The Era of Marie Antoinette" (1756-1793), wife of Louis XVI. Last year's festival focused on "The Era of Madame de Pompadour" (1721-1764), Louis XV's maîtresse-en-titre and confidante. At the center of a changing social and artistic landscape in the middle of the 18th century, she among other things, helped bring about new freedoms and forms of music. This year's focus went back yet further with "The Era of Madame de Maintenon" (1635-1719), the secret wife of Louis XIV, with a look at woman's role in the arts, education and society amidst the weakening aristocracy at the onset of the 18th century.

Les Fêtes ou le Triomphe de Thalie

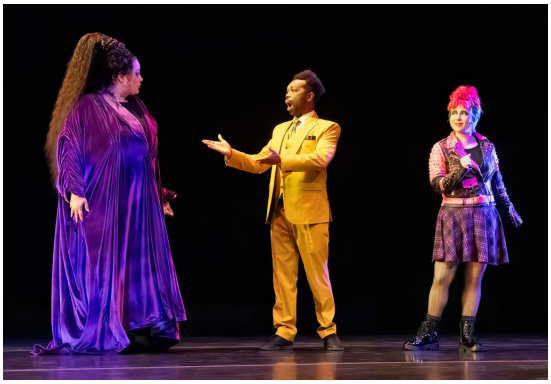
It was thus especially apt to have as this season's centerpiece the flamboyant opéra-ballet *Les Fêtes ou le Triomphe de Thalie, Ballet en musique* (1714 – 1720), with music composed by Jean-Joseph Mouret. It represents the beginning of a change in the type of subject matter and audience taste in opera of that time, from mythology (the gods and heroes of Lully's tragédie lyrique) to comic entertainments with an emphasis on ordinary people and their situations. The work is also amazingly woman-centered and woman-empowered for its time, with its three short comic acts: "La Fille" ("The Girl"), "La Veuve Coquette" ("The Coquettish Widow"), and "La Femme" ("The Wife"). As Opera Lafayette's Founder and Artistic Director Ryan Brown states, "the women sort of get the better of the men. They're funny stories about love...," in which the women really care less about putting love first.



A variety of dancers and dance styles Photo: Jen Packard

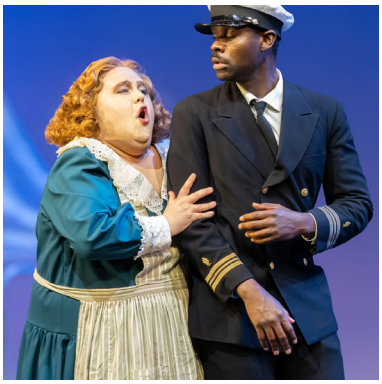
The production, first in Washington, D.C., and then at El Museo del Barrio in New York City, was the modern premiere of this landmark work. It was a delight on many levels, especially in its wonderful seamless amalgamation of different dance types, from Baroque dance, to ballet and modern dance, to Broadway-type dance and even to traditional dance from India. Being a French Baroque opéra-ballet, dance was, of course, essential, and it helped to have Baroque dance specialist Catherine Turocy as Stage Director, coordinating a talented team of choreographers: Julian Donahue and Julia Bengtsson (with dancers from her New York Baroque Dance company) for Act I; Anuradha Nehru and Pragnya Thamire for Act II (with dancers from Kalanidhi Dance for the classical Indian dance, which included animated foot stamping as well); and Caroline Copeland for Act III.

All this was done within the confines of a thoroughly delightful modern day production, with a variety of 20th century costumes. As Turocy has stated, "It was a very cutting-edge opera at the time, and it says in the documents that the performers are supposed to be in contemporary dress." This contemporary feel was enhanced by the simplest of means, with scenic backdrops by Jeffery Martin effectively lit in various ways by Lighting Designer Christopher Brusberg. The work began with a satirical prologue on the stage of the Paris Opéra, the kind of stage required for the traditional tragédie lyrique by Lully. On it, a swirl of lights highlighted the argument between the muses of tragedy (Melpomene) and comedy (Thalia). First came the forceful soprano Angel Azzarra playing to the hilt the role of an indignant prima donna as she rolled off a list of operatic tragedies, all by Lully. Next, a perky lighter-voiced Paulina Francisco poked fun at her adversary, leaving it up to Apollo, the stentorian bass Jonathan Woody, to mediate. Comedy wins, and the dancers (with chorus) take over to prepare for the playful entrées to follow.

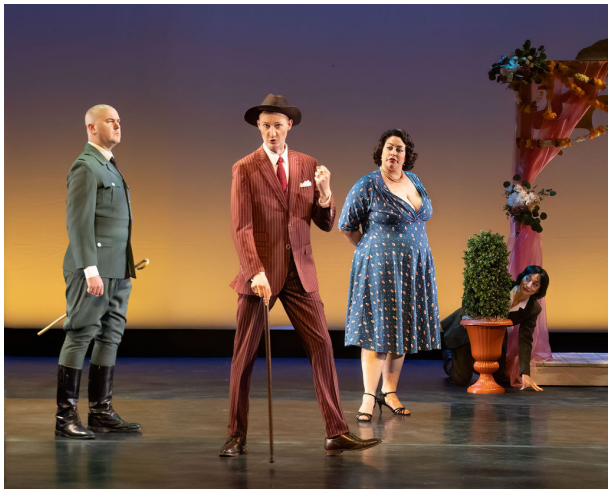


The Prologue: Apollo decides between tragedy and comedy
Photo: Jen Packard

In the first, an absurdly hilarious plot unfolds at the harbor around "La Fille," with Paulina Francisco in the title role. First the sea captain Alcaste (baritone Jean-Bernard Cerin) attempts to woo "la fille," Léonore, the daughter of his friend Cléon (Mr. Woody). The hilarity comes when Alcaste tries to make Léonore jealous by wooing her mother, played by animated tenor Patrick Kilbride, appropriately hyperbolic *en travesti*. The audience loved it.



The wooing Photo: Jen Packard

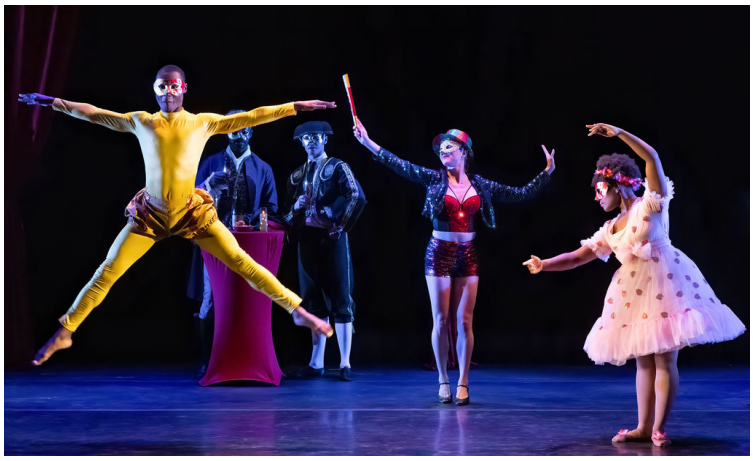


The widow evades her suitors Photo: Jen Packard

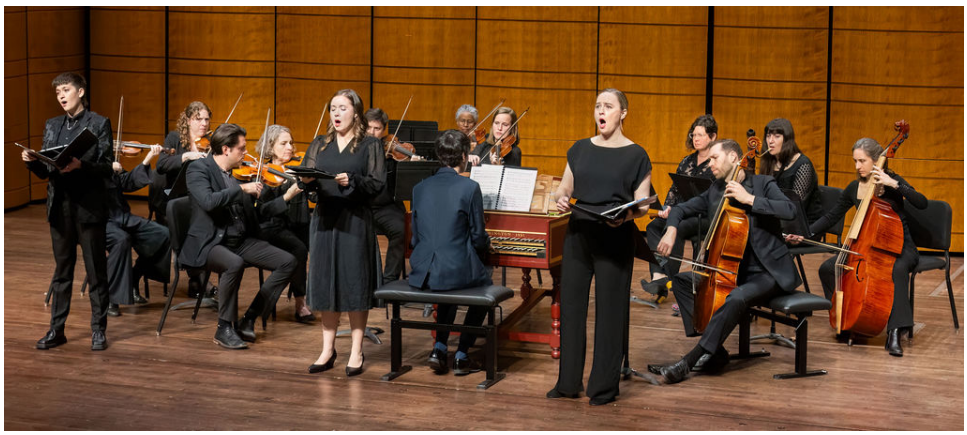
By contrast, in the second Act, now in the bucolic country for "The Coquettish Widow," the lovely soprano Pascale Beaudin as Isabel enjoys the freedom of widowhood. Soprano Angell Azzarra returns as Isabel's friend after her role in the Prologue, still pushy and assertive as ever, to help ward off two suitors. Neither wins. Isabel really does care less about putting lovers first! The men shrug and move on.

After intermission, we return to a masked ball on stage. There "The Wife," Caliste (Ms. Beaudin), now scorned and furious, catches her husband *en flagrante délit*. Her energized confidant, soprano Ariana Wehr, with her lively coloratura and brilliant top notes, indeed looked ahead to the Oscar of Verdi's *A Masked Ball* in the next century. But in the 18th century, critics found fault with all the earthiness of *Les Fêtes ou le Triomphe de Thalie*; Mouret responded by mocking them in an epilogue, "La Critique," as he had mocked the genre *tragédie en musique* in the Prologue. Amongst the quibbling characters, the versatile Mr. Kilbride returns, with yet more comic flare in horn-rimmed glasses as the god of satire, Momus. As the program notes sum up, "Momus allows that the music is 'aimable,' the dance 'vive, admirable,' but as for the poetry, he's glad he didn't write it." He then calls all to "laugh, sing, and dance."

Momus is essentially correct. The music of Mouret's work, if not profound, is indeed "amiable." And in the hands of conductor Christophe Rousset, key in the modern revival of French Baroque music making his conducting debut with Opera Lafayette, it was more than amiable. The orchestra of period instruments was full of subtilty and nuance that served well to bring the divertissements, choruses, and Italianate arias to life. It also helped enliven the omnipresent country dances, indeed "vive, admirable," to supplement the frivolous plots. And as Rousset states in the hefty program book: "Remarkable even today is the place of women in these intrigues. These women, freethinkers, drive the action and introduce the fresh air of modernity." This all combined for a delightfully entertaining evening of music theater, more than I ever would have expected from the refined genre of opéra-ballet and French Baroque music.



Dancers at the Masked Ball Photo: Jen Packard



Justin Taylor leads the Opera Lafayette Orchestra and Soloists in Moreau's *Esther*
Photo: Jen Packard

Two Takes on Racine's *Esther*

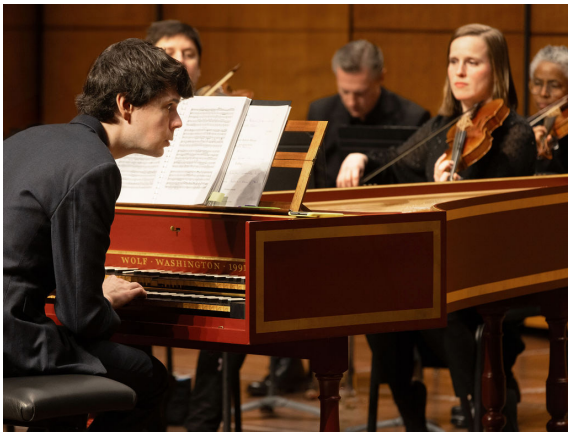
Jean-Baptiste Moreau

With another enterprising program two days later on May 9 at Saint Peter's Church in New York City, Opera Lafayette wrapped up its focus on "The Era of Madame de Maintenon" with an instructive comparison of two operatic takes on the play *Esther* by Jean Racine, written in 1689 for the moral edification of the young ladies of the Maison royale de Saint-Louis at Saint-Cyr, founded by Madame de Maintenon. First came the work as she originally commissioned it from Racine as a "kind of moral poem" planned from the start with assistance from court composer Jean-Baptiste Moreau to function as a balance of art and education, combining the Greek and French classical traditions with music and a respectable story.

The focus of the second half of the program was Handel's *Esther* of 1718, first performed for a private performance at Cannons, the residence of Handel's long-time patron, the Earl of Carnarvon. Although Handel probably had no direct knowledge of either Racine's play or Moreau's music, the coupling made for both an illustrative historical context of the two works. It also made for a fascinating evening of two takes on this landmark play derived from the Old Testament about the Jewish queen who came forth from a hidden identity to save her people.

As for the Racine/Moreau collaboration, as Anne Piéjus' helpful program notes clarify, together the pair created a work "alternating between declamation and song, with expansive musical structures containing an overture, prelude, and extensive sung scenes at the end of each act." Additionally the Bible narrative was treated in the manner of Sophocles with added chorus. With meticulous musical director Justin Taylor at the harpsichord, the numerous musical interludes came to life with delicate, idiomatic élan. So too, three female singers made effective contributions, when not harmonizing in Moreau's straightforward homophonic choruses: sopranos Paulina Francisco and Elisse Albian, each in her Opera Lafayette Debut, and alto Kristen Dubenion-Smith. As the chorus, originally for some 24 girls as Jewish maidens, they were equally involved in Esther's captivity and ultimate fate.

The solo numbers, although with a hint of the operatic, were certainly modified to suit the young women of the initial performance. But Opera Lafayette's compelling soloists made the best of them: Ms. Francisco, in the clarion lament of her opening aria, "Pleurons et gémissons" ("Let us cry and moan"); Ms. Alban, in her poignant plea, reinforced with obbligati recorders, "Dieu d'Israël, dissipe enfin cette ombre" ("God of Israel, dissipate finally this shadow"); and



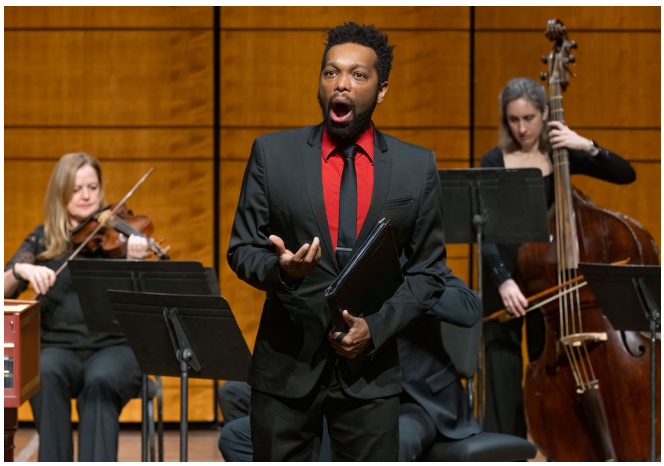
Meistro Taylor from the harpsichord Photo: Jen Packard

Ms. Dubenion-Smith, with her rich lower register, advising the king to desist from his barbaric ways in "Détourne, Roi puissant" ("Turn away mighty king"). What came through also was the subtlety of Moreau's writing in these quintessentially French airs. If not particularly dynamic in their rather mundane phrasing, they at least highlighted the importance of attention to text, and showcased an important, if not especially demanding, sample of French composition under the influence of Madame de Maintenon.

George Frideric Handel

There was no such drawback from the energized performance of Handel's first version of *Esther* in 1718, which in historical context has come down as the first English oratorio. Nothing like it had hitherto appeared in England, and as musicologist and conductor Christopher Hogwood has pointed out, although "...an uneven composition, on this foundation was built….the whole edifice of English oratorio." For me at least, this reduced, though vivid, concert version was the musical highlight of the entire week. Streamlining the piece to roughly half its length gave a powerful, dynamic thrust to this early oratorio, and six soloists provided the critical framework as Handel envisioned, helping propel the drama along.

The three-part overture under the especially animated leadership of Mr. Taylor from the harpsichord, with its wide-ranging dynamics and nuanced slow movement, set us up for the powerful music drama ahead. And sure enough, bass-baritone (and Co-Musical Director) Jonathan Woody then got the oratorio off to an electrifying start with his opening aria as Haman, the king's malevolent minister and arch-enemy of the Israelites, "Pluck root and branch / from out the land." Over a throbbing dotted accompaniment, his staggered declamation was riveting. Even amidst an accomplished cast of soloists, his was the standout performance of the night. Equally expressive were his two last arias, his pretentious plea for mercy to the Queen ("Turn not, O Queen") and the harrowing final aria of the piece before the king, his self-pitying "How art thou fallen."



A harrowing Haman Photo: Jen Packard

Two elements especially seized Handel's imagination. One was the figure of the bloodthirsty Haman; the other, the plight of the exiled Jews. Hence the tightened performance jumped early on to the moving chorus of Israelites, "Shall we of servitude complain" punctuated by the delightful cavatina for an Israelite women sung by soprano Paulina Francisco, especially eloquent now as a Handelian vocalist. When she doubled as Esther,

her later numbers were just as compelling, beginning with her poignant plea for divine intervention, "Tears assist me, pity moving." As for the stubborn king, Ahasuerus, the rich-toned tenor Jesse Darden effectively complemented her in duets, then became commanding in his final, decisive recitative "Guards, seize the traitor." Still, as per Handel's conception, what held the evening together was the choral element, helping to end the evening in a blaze of glory with "The Lord our enemy has slain" and finally, "Forever blessed be thy holy name."

Using two works rooted in Racine's play *Esther*, Opera Lafayette looked both back at a relative rarity for its day and forward with this first tentative oratorio by Handel. With the promise of this early work, one may wonder why Handel then turned for many years to the "most exotic of entertainments," opera seria, with its singers in splendid costumes posed on stage, vying to outdo each other in thrilling, but sometimes impossibly virtuosic, da capo arias. One may also wonder what the moralizing but ambitious Madame de Maintenon might have said about such brilliant decadence and Baroque excess! In any case, many thanks to Opera Lafayette for illuminating the impact of this influencial woman.

Justin Taylor and Opera Lafayette's Orchestra for Handel's *Esther* Photo: Jen Packard