

Winter Kept Us Warm

JESSE SIMON

Strauss' two late mythological operas, *Daphne* and *Die Liebe der Danae*, are often viewed as problematic and have long been kept on the sidelines for the simple reason that no one seems to know quite what to do with them. This is a great shame as neither can be considered minor works; indeed, *Danae* has passages to rival the greatest of Strauss' interwar operas. If it is easy to place the blame with the libretti of Joseph Gregor – whose characters and scenarios manage to draw from classical sources without quite hitting the vein of universal truth that makes ancient mythology so perpetually relevant – the new production of *Daphne* at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, directed by Romeo Castellucci and conducted by Thomas Guggeis, presented a work that lacked none of the ingredients necessary for an evening of compelling theatre.

Without sacrificing the mythological framework or the essential structure of the drama, Mr Castellucci transposed the opera to a world entirely of his own making. The curtain rose on a snowbound landscape, flat and largely featureless save for a few rocks, some distant evergreens shrouded in fog, and a single spindly tree. Midway through Daphne's first monologue it started to snow, and a dense but gentle snowfall continued unbroken until the death of Leukippos more than an hour later. The falling snow proved curiously hypnotic, creating the optical illusion that everything on stage was attempting to float upwards.

While the manufactured snowfall gave the staging a hyperreal beauty, as though the action was taking place within the hermetic world of snow globe, it was Mr Castellucci's ability to paint with light and fog that gave the staging its distinctive look. The events in the libretto begin at the very end of the day and continue throughout the night and Mr Castellucci presented us with a series of twilight and moonlit tableaux, occasionally turned golden by the artificial light of Apollo, but remaining mostly in the spectrum of deep wintry blues.

Within the barren world of the staging, Daphne had formed an emotional attachment to the tree, the last non-human living thing around. And while Gaea, Peneios, and their extended community of tundra dwellers wandered around the stage in parkas and heavy boots, Daphne, in the presence of her beloved tree, stripped down to almost nothing, apparently

Castellucci,
Daphne
© 2023 by
Staatsoper Unter
den Linden



**Berlin, domingo,
19 de febrero de
2023.** Staatsoper

Unter den Linden. Strauss: Daphne. Romeo Castellucci, director. René Pape (Peneios), Anna Kissjudit (Gaea), Vera-Lotte Boecker (Daphne), Magnus Dietrich (Leukippos), and Pavel Černoch (Apollo). Staatskapelle Berlin. Thomas Guggeis, conductor



Strauss: Daphne. Thomas Guggeis, conductor. Romeo Castellucci, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, February 2023. © 2023 by Staatsoper Unter den Linden.

impervious to the elements that had forced her family into such a marginal existence. If the libretto remains somewhat vague on Daphne's motivations, the staging suggested that the moment she became untethered from the tree and allowed herself to be kissed by Apollo provoked a kind of existential crisis that could be resolved only by returning to earth from which both she and the tree had emerged.

The first half of the staging – up until the arrival of Apollo – functioned mostly as a straightforward retelling of the libretto, but the second half ventured into far more symbolic territory. The hints were there from the beginning: to the left of the stage was a small plinth with the initials ER (which stood neither for Elizabeth Regina nor Emergency Room but was later revealed to be the German masculine singular pronoun) topped with a plastic jug half filled with a red liquid that looked like blood; in Daphne's first monologue she revealed an open wound in her side, possibly from the leaden arrow of cupid that rendered her unresponsive to the romantic attention of mortals. In the second half, however, symbolism took over from narrative culminating in a kind of *deus ex machina* in which the *deus* was the title page from the first edition of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. If Mr Castellucci's subtle shift from narrative to symbolic drama worked so well, it is perhaps because his most far ranging associations remained rooted in the depiction of a very human tragedy.

The role of Daphne may not demand the stamina of the Kaiserin or the raw inexhaustible force of Elektra, but Vera-Lotte Boecker approached it with a high level of dramatic engagement. In her opening monologue she seemed intent on dispelling any sense that her attachment to nature might derive from innocence or naivité; the elegance and agility of her phrasing (challenged only once or twice by an excess of orchestral vigour) gave depth to her character, and the impassioned 'geliebter Baum' section offered a foretaste of the crisis ahead. During her later meeting with Apollo she was able to capture the whirlwind of confused emotions, but she was at her peak throughout the climactic scene, in which her grief for the dead Leukippos led first to frenzy then to lucid clarity.

Of Daphne's two suitors, the Leukippos of Magnus Dietrich was coloured with enough weight to lend a certain gravity to the character's youthful passions; his finest scene was his first encounter with Daphne, in which he conveyed a mood of sullen defeat with great finesse. As Apollo, Pavel Černoch often came across as cool and detached in a role that demanded greater ardour: both the kiss scene and the revealing of his true identity seemed understated – especially next to the excitement of the orchestra – although his final monologue, delivered with forthright equanimity, was more successful.

While neither Peneios nor Gaea are as central to the drama, both René Pape and Anna



Strauss: Daphne. Thomas Guggeis, conductor. Romeo Castellucci, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, February 2023. © 2023 by Staatsoper Unter den Linden.



Strauss: *Daphne*. Thomas Guggeis, conductor. Romeo Castellucci, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, February 2023. © 2023 by Staatsoper Unter den Linden.

Kissjudit delivered quietly great performances. When Mr Pape made his first appearance he had a galvanising effect, greeting his kinsmen and followers with benevolent warmth and concentrating the high expectations for the festivities into a few elegant phrases. Ms Kissjudit was even more impressive: in her higher notes there was a captivating radiance, but it was the effortless strength of the lowest lying passages – which constitute the majority of Gaea’s first appearance – that gave the performance its earthy splendour.

The opening bars of the brief orchestral prelude evoked a mood of pastoral melancholy due largely to the gentle overlapping of the woodwinds – who would have thought that

Strauss’ vision of Arcadia would work equally well with the snowy desolation of the staging? – but even before the first lines had been sung, conductor Thomas Guggeis declared a far greater interest in the volatile passions beneath the work’s bucolic surface. It was an approach that often yielded striking results, underlining Daphne’s fervent attachment to nature in her first monologue, creating a mood of excited anticipation around the arrival of Apollo, and realising the tragic potential of the climactic scenes. However if Mr Guggeis responded with greatest enthusiasm to the score’s most excitable moments, the uncertain calm in the aftermath of Apollo’s kiss and the quiet force of the concluding transformation music were equally memorable.

When Strauss composed *Daphne* his greatest operatic successes were several decades behind him, and he was even further removed from the tone poems that had brought him his initial fame. While the focussed irony that informed his greatest operas had largely vanished (although it would make a welcome reappearance in time for *Capriccio*), he had lost none of his skill as a musical dramatist, and if *Daphne* can sometimes seem a casual entry in Strauss’ operatic corpus, the new production at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden suggested otherwise: between the expressive reading of Mr Guggeis and the densely allusive symbolism in Mr Castellucci’s staging, the evening found a continuous source of musical, visual and intellectual stimulation within the seemingly placid world of this late-period tragedy.