

It should come as no surprise that the Italian composer Francesco Cavalli is experiencing something of a vogue lately: his operas were the most popular of the seventeenth century before disappearing from the stage for 250 years. Modern audiences seek out his music for its mix of farcical absurdity and tragic myth, the same qualities which set his Venetian audience, the earliest public operagoers, aflame. The work of dedicated scholars and conductors has given his operas a small but significant niche in today's repertory. And now, composers have stepped up to demonstrate the Baroque genius's contemporary relevance. Lucia Ronchetti, a former student of the late spectral master Gérard Grisey, shares both Cavalli's nationality and his ability to craft dramatic splendor. Last weekend, the Konzerthaus Berlin presented her "Lezioni di Tenebra," ("Lessons of Darkness") an explosive adaptation of Cavalli's 1649 *Giasone*. A co-commission from the Konzerthaus, Fondazione Musica Per Roma, KunstFestSpiele Herrenhausen and the Salzburg Biennale, the opera condenses *Giasone*'s four hours into one, enhancing the emotional impact while compressing the events. With the help of a brilliant staging, Ronchetti has created a masterpiece which glosses on Baroque extravagance while thoroughly modernizing its musical language.

*Giasone*, with a well-crafted libretto by Andrea Cicognini, is a freewheeling, irreverent take on the classic Medea tale, replacing jealous filicide with tragicomic nonsense. Jason of the Argonauts seeks the charms of the witch Medea while hunting for the prized Golden Fleece, abandoning his former love Hipsypile just as Medea throws off the worship of the king Aegeus. After many confrontations of mistaken identity and attempted murder, the wrong lovers re-unite happily—turning the myth on its head, Hipsypile is paired with Jason, and Medea with Aegeus.

Ronchetti takes the plot as a point of departure, preserving Cicognini's text while enhancing the psychological drama of his characters; she strips away the conflict of gods which opens the work, leaving the principals' fates in their own hands. The seven characters are distributed between two singers and a four-part choir: soprano Katia Guedes sings Medea, Aegeus, and Demo, countertenor Daniel Gloger sings Giasone, Oreste and Hipsypile, and the Vocalconsort Berlin provides the Greek chorus and the duty-bound captain Besso. Much of Cicognini's bawdy humor disappears, replaced by a Wagnerian interpretation of Jason's and Medea's love—they can only be together in darkness. It ends with all four lovers in conflict, the confusion heightened to an extreme

before the music abruptly stops.

It would be impossible to do justice to Ronchetti's musical treatment of Cavalli without describing the clever stage devices conceived by director Matthias Rebstock and designers Mirella Weingarten and Sabine Hilscher. An intricate pulley system, suspended in the air and operated by singers in each corner of the small theater, sends Bauhaus-style puppet creatures slowly moving above the audience's heads. Some symbolize relationships between characters (when Jason and Medea first embrace, their puppets link together), others replace theatrical effects (tiny red lights stand in for the spirits). With the principal characters positioned across the room from each other, the mechanical system elegantly stands in for their entanglements. The lithe, earthy puppets, more Paul Klee than Jim Henson, abstract the dramatic action without removing the force of Cavalli's narrative. The virtuosic Parco della Musica Contemporanea Ensemble, a septet of strings, piano, and percussion, is split into two groups placed on opposite ends of the room. Instrumentalists often become a part of the narrative: when Medea lulls Jason to sleep, the cellist feigns slumber as three other string players pluck his instrument for him.

Ronchetti's score thoughtfully combines Cavalli's musical splendor with spectral ghostliness, refracting Baroque harmony through a lens of quasi-electronic sounds. It opens with an eerie choir muttering wordless, breathy tones, accompanied by the strings' glassy harmonics. Gradually, shimmering antique harmonies emerge, gorgeously wrought from the Stockhausen-like vocal gasps. Arias often directly imitate Cavalli's originals but with grotesque percussive accompaniment or strange choral interjections. The comic patter of the servants Oreste and Demo becomes syllabic nonsense, flighty *coloratura* gestures which show off the strengths of the singers. Ronchetti revels in the effects possible with her vocal and instrumental ensemble, performing vivid acts of word painting—when Besso mistakenly throws Medea into the sea, a percussionist slowly submerges glasses into water, a fitting musical and theatrical description of the event.

Brazilian soprano Katia Guedes proved a versatile and captivating Medea, but the star of the show was Daniel Gloger, whose lyrical countertenor embodied the erotic, effeminate Jason. Ronchetti places each character in a different vocal range, and Gloger often captured two *Fachs* simultaneously, quarreling with himself as the high-pitched Hipsypile and her smitten confidant Oreste. The

Vocalconsort Berlin deftly navigated Ronchetti's unusual effects; conductor Tonino Battista, positioned behind the audience, held everything together remarkably.

*Giasone*'s most famous moment comes at the end of Cavalli's first act, when Medea invokes Pluto and the spirits to aid Jason in his quest, in a show-stopping but remarkably simple aria outlining a minor triad. Ronchetti retains the notes while muting the singer, accompanied by a deadened, prepared piano (two percussionists rattle the instrument's strings as the pianist realizes the appropriate *continuo*). The effect is one of steely sorcery, uncannily transforming tonality. When the spirits respond in Cavalli's original setting, a snappy, bizarre acapella chorus, modern and Baroque are flipped on their heads: Cavalli, not Ronchetti, sounds contemporary.