

## Art and Craft

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When Sonya Yoncheva arrived on stage about half an hour into the Staatsoper's new production of Cherubini's *Médée*, it altered the course of the evening. Her first aria was the kind of immersive, expansive, expressive performance that one always hopes to hear but rarely does. Each note of each phrase was so perfectly articulated, and each moment led so necessarily to the next, that one was held motionless in anticipation. Suddenly it no longer mattered that Jason was a sleaze, that the golden fleece looked suspiciously like a beheaded bantha, or that the production seemed to take place in a giant storage locker. In the course of a single aria, it became the kind of evening where the quality of the staging, of the supporting cast, and even of the opera itself were rendered subordinate to a grand performance.

The staging, although somewhat unconventional, was not without promise. It was performed in the original French, but in an extensively edited version – prepared by director Andrea Breth in collaboration with Sergio Morabito – that removed much of the spoken dialogue and pared the story down to its essentials. Ms Breth, who has directed a handful of arrestingly bleak productions for the Staatsoper (and, lest we forget, an irredeemably terrible *Lulu*), spent the first act establishing uneasy relationships between Dircé, Créon and Jason that, on their own, might have made for a compelling tragedy. The action took place in an endless complex of storage lockers with industrial rolling doors, some rust colouration, and a conspicuously realistic ventilation system – Martin Zehetgruber's stunning set had an impressive attention to detail – and it was in this oppressively bland space, devoid of natural light and air, that Créon kept his vast collection of artworks sealed in wooden crates.

The curtain rose on two attendants forcing an unwilling Dircé into a wedding dress for her impending marriage to Jason. She was right to be reluctant. Jason, when he arrived, was shown to be a serial philanderer who reeked of hair-gel and whose purple suit told us pretty much everything we needed to know; when Dircé later caught him putting the moves on one of the attendants, it merely confirmed our suspicions. Yet he had managed to weasel his way into Créon's good graces by procuring the golden fleece and, with his marriage,

Breth: Médée  
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Staatsoper  
Unter den Linden.  
Cherubini: Médée.

Andrea Breth,

director. Sonya Yoncheva (Médée),  
Charles Castronovo (Jason), Iain Paterson  
(Créon), Elsa Dreisig (Dircé), Marina  
Prudenskaya (Néris), Sarah Aristidou and  
Corinna Scheurle (Attendants to Dircé).  
Staatskapelle Berlin. Daniel Barenboim,  
conductor



seemed poised to inherit a vast underworld art empire.



Cherubini: Médée. Andrea Breth, director. Daniel Barenboim, conductor. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, October 2018. © Bernd Uhlig, 2018.

Then Medea arrived. With her long hair, henna tattoos (which, from a distance, bore an unfortunate resemblance to fake-tan) and dishevelled gown hanging off one shoulder, she had a primitive wildness that stood out against both the featurelessness of the storage lockers and Créon's expensively-dressed art mafia. She was a self-contained whirlwind, and when she appeared to claim her sons and rightful husband, Ms Breth effectively ceded the opera to her. The stage continued to revolve, there was a considerable amount of stage fire in the third act, and there were several nice images – the angry, dying Medea pushing against the Staatsoper's heavy velvet curtain as it drew to a close in opera's final

seconds was a stroke of genius – but there were also long stretches when the characters were forced to fend for themselves, seemingly abandoned by their director. The story of Dircé, Jason and Créon vanished almost entirely. Even the terrible act at the heart of the tragedy – the murder of the two children – was downplayed to the point of near invisibility; when Jason appeared to ask where his children were, there were only two burning boxes at the back of the stage to answer his question. With a less dominant Medea, the second act would have dragged terribly and third might have been stripped completely of its cathartic potential.

A fortunately the production had Ms Yoncheva, whose embodiment of Medea as an all-consuming force of nature was more than sufficient to pick up the slack. With the exception of Nérís' quietly haunting aria in the second act, Ms Yoncheva held the stage from her first appearance to the opera's final bar, and even when she wasn't singing, her fixed stare, extended arms and inability to stand still without swaying suggested a character possessed by equal parts determination and madness. When she was singing, little else mattered. Her first aria was so exquisite that even the opportunistic Jason was not unmoved. She conveyed magnificent rage in an electrifying duet with Jason that closed the first act, disarming tenderness in her attempts to sway Créon, and a chilling resolve during the marriage scene. The third act was effectively a showcase for her talents, and the mounting vocal intensity coupled with the flames rising from shipping crates provided the opera with precisely the thrilling conclusion it needed.

In the brief window between the overture and Medea's arrival, Elsa Dreisig mixed sweetness of tone and bitterness of feeling into Dircé's emotionally-ambivalent aria, and Iain Paterson, although less weighted toward the low-end than one might expect from an august King, gave Créon an easy melodic agility. Charles Castronovo's big voice and big personality were a good fit for the graceful lines of Jason's early aria – his suave phrasing both complemented and slightly redeemed the character – and he was able to generate convincing sparks of passion in his later duet with Medea. While the production did little to

acknowledge the presence of Medea's servant Néris, Marina Prudenskaya made sure the part did not go unnoticed; her understated, beautifully solemn aria in the second act had an affecting quality that served as both a break in the action and a turning point in the drama.

Beethoven and Weber were both admirers of Cherubini's music and, in Daniel Barenboim's reading of the score, one could hear why. The overture was fashioned into an exciting stand-alone micro-drama, and the prelude to the third act generated considerable intensity through its slow-burning insistence. Mr Barenboim's ability to create dramatic tension from unhurried tempi was, indeed, one of the evening's greatest assets; under his direction, the orchestra rose to the rhythmic fury of Medea's attack in the concluding scene of the first act, and kept much of the second act at an ominous simmer. The sound of the Staatskapelle was expansive and the playing tightly focussed, with incisive strings, vigorous timpani and gorgeous solo-flute throughout. If much of the production was designed to keep our



Cherubini: Médée. Andrea Breth, director. Daniel Barenboim, conductor. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, October 2018. © Bernd Uhlig, 2018.



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attention focussed on the obvious thrills of Ms Yoncheva's Medea, Mr Barenboim and the Staatskapelle made a more subtle, but no less persuasive argument for the qualities of Cherubini's music.

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