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Divine lust and rage, as told by Handel: Hotly anticipated new production makes its US premiere at the Hop

HANOVER, NH—A delicious new production of “Handel’s sexiest opera” makes its US premiere at the Hop on Wednesday, April 10—part of a seven-venue tour that takes it to Paris, London and other US and UK locations, including New York’s Carnegie Hall.

Semele will be performed by renowned early music orchestra English Concert, led by Artistic Director Harry Bicket, with vocal soloists from the top ranks of Baroque music and the ample choral parts sung by New York’s Grammy-nominated Clarion Choir, directed by rising-star conductor Steven Fox, Dartmouth class of 2000.

Since 2013, the English Concert has doing annual performances at Carnegie Hall of Handel works, under a commission from the New York presenter. The performances have been rapturously received. Wrote the New York Classical Review, “The Concert’s Handel performances ... have been among the best classical music experiences over the past several years.” Wrote Broadway World, “One can’t say enough about the splendors of The English Concert under Bicket. At every turn, it seemed, they brought more colors and virtuosity to the music than we have any right to expect, whether in grand solos or the most minor phrase.”

Semele has been one of the most hotly anticipated. Dubbed “Handel’s sexiest opera” by renowned early music conductor John Gardiner, Semele tells a tale of Greek gods, goddesses, lust and revenge. The story unfurls with irresistible theatricality and color in a stream of easy-flowing melodies, dazzling coloratura and risqué language (the libretto was drawn from a 1706 work by Restoration playwright William Congreve, based on one of the more salacious passages of Ovid’s Metamorphoses). Along with gorgeous passages for the chorus (portraying priests, soothsayers, nymphs and others), the score includes such show-stopping arias as the title character’s florid “Endless pleasure, endless love” and touching “O sleep, why dost thou leave me,” and Jupiter’s “Where’er you walk”—a recital favorite to this day.

When it premiered in 1744, however, Semele created a scandal and received only a handful of performances—unlike Handel’s hugely successful Messiah which had premiered one year earlier. Messiah librettist Charles Jennens was among its critics, writing that it was “a bawdy Opera.” Semele fell into prolonged neglect until its first stage performances, in Cambridge, England, in 1925 and in London in 1954. These fueled an enthusiasm for the work that has not since lapsed.

Playing the mortal woman Semele, who foolishly beds down with head god Jupiter in a bid for immortality, is Brenda Rae, acclaimed for her “tireless, golden soprano” (The Times, London), and “dazzling, pinpoint coloratura” (Opera News). Jupiter’s wife Juno, who responds with fury at the betrayal, is played by Elizabeth
DeShong, of whom the National Post of Canada wrote: “Vibrant tone, pyrotechnic technique, intense stage presence, spot-on-diction: this American mezzo-soprano has it all.” The faithless Jupiter is played by Benjamin Hulet, a young British tenor with substantial operatic credits in the UK and Europe. Other soloists are Soloman Howard, Ailish Tynan and Christopher Lowrey.

In Semelé, choral parts pay a very prominent role—so much that some consider it an oratorio. In this production, they are sung by the Clarion Choir, one of the US’s leading professional vocal ensembles. Along with performing on some of the greatest stages of North America and Europe, the group was featured on PBS’s NYC-Arts program in 2014, and received nominations for 2017 and 2019 Grammy awards and a 2017 BBC Music Magazine Choral Award. The Choir’s Lincoln Center debut at the 2011 White Light Festival was described by The Wall Street Journal as “superb...the choristers sang with purity of tone and ensemble precision.” The group’s 2014 revival of a 1923 work by Russian composer Maximilian Steinberg was called “a beautiful UK premiere... expertly paced by the conductor Steven Fox, the singing was fluid and full of light and shade” by The Times (UK).

Fox has charted a fascinating artistic path since graduating from Dartmouth 19 years ago with a majors in music and Russian studies. He continued his studies at London’s Royal Academy of Music, earning a master’s degree and several important awards. After that, he went to St. Petersburg, Russia, and founded what may have been Russia’s first Baroque orchestra, reviving a lost repertoire of Russian 18th-century music from the court of Catherine the Great.

In 2006, he became Artistic Director of the Clarion Music Society and founded the Clarion Choir. Over his tenure, he has led the Clarion Society in highly acclaimed performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the White Light Festival at Lincoln Center, the Miller Theatre at Columbia University, and Carnegie Hall. He’s been called “visionary” by BBC Music Magazine, and named “a conductor to watch” by Seen and Heard International, and The New York Times praised a recent concert as “an inspired interpretation. Mr. Fox revealed the drama of the score with vivid dynamic shadings. Intonation and pacing were exemplary throughout the performance.” Clarion has been nominated for Grammy awards in 2017 and 2019.

In addition to leading Clarion, Fox is midway through a four-year position as Music Director of the Cathedral Choir of Washington’s National Cathedral and has appeared as a guest conductor with esteemed ensembles around North American and Europe. the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra in San Francisco, the Handel and Haydn Society in Boston, Juilliard415 at Lincoln Center, the Charleston Symphony Orchestra and the Quebec Symphony Orchestra. He has given master classes and clinics at Dartmouth, The Juilliard School and Yale University and is is a preparatory conductor for the Yale University Schola Cantorum, and Lecturer in Music at the State University of New York, Purchase College.

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The Hopkins Center for the Arts

Founded in 1962, “the Hop” is a multi-disciplinary academic, visual and performing arts center dedicated to uncovering insights, igniting passions, and nurturing talents to help Dartmouth and the surrounding Upper Valley community engage imaginatively and contribute creatively to our world. Each year the Hop presents more than 300 live events and films by visiting artists as well as Dartmouth students and the Dartmouth community, and reaches more than 22,000 Upper Valley residents and students with outreach and arts education programs. After a celebratory 50th-anniversary season in 2012-13, the Hop enters its second half-century with renewed passion for mentoring young artists, supporting the development of new work, and providing a laboratory for participation and experimentation in the arts.
CALENDAR LISTING

Handel’s *Semele* by The English Concert
Harry Bicket, Director
Wednesday, April 10, 7 pm
Spaulding
COST $70/60/40
18 & under $20
Dartmouth students $10

The Hop hosts the US premiere of The English Concert’s semi-staged production of the English-language Handel opera *Semele*. In this sensuous and sparkling charmer, mortal maiden Semele incites the jealousy of the goddess Juno, resulting in some of opera’s most delicious arias of lust and rage. Coloratura Branda Rae plays the feckless mortal to mezzo Elizabeth DeShong’s furious goddess. New York’s Clarion Choir, directed by rising-star conductor Steven Fox ’00, gives voice to the choruses of priests, soothsayers, nymphs and others who tunefully witness Semele’s downfall.

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