

BOSTON EARLY MUSIC FESTIVAL

Chamber Opera Series 2011
Marc-Antoine Charpentier

PART I

La Couronne de Fleurs

The Crown of Flowers

First and Second Scenes

A Grove

Flore, the goddess of flowers, brings back spring after a terrible winter. She invites the French shepherdesses and shepherds to return to the grove, not so long since a battlefield. To celebrate the peace that the king has just given them, the goddess announces a poetry contest: to whomever most eloquently sings about the recent deeds of Louis XIV, Flore promises she will bestow a crown of flowers. In anticipation of the contest, they all call for Nature to be silent: birds, winds, and waters should listen to their royal songs.

The poetic contest begins and the shepherds and shepherdesses try to invent the most beautiful poem praising the king. Amaranthe compares Louis's warlike power to that of a devastating spring torrent. Forestan speaks of Louis at the head of his army as a terrifying bolt of lightning. Hyacinthe contrasts Louis with the fabled heroes of ancient Greece, who are nothing compared with the living monarch. Mirtil asserts that future generations will scarcely believe the least of Louis's exploits, as they will have nothing comparable in their own day.

La Descente d'Orphée aux Enfers

The Descent of Orpheus to the Underworld

Act I

A Grove

The nymphs attend their friend Euridice during the preparations for her wedding with Orphée. Daphné, Aréthuse, and Enone invite nature to join in the rejoicing, but while picking some flowers to make a wedding crown for her future husband, the bride is bitten by a poisonous snake. Orphée arrives with the shepherds just in time to hear the final words of his beloved. Euridice dies, and Orphée laments with the shepherds.

Overwhelmed by the sadness of his own wretched fate, Orphée decides to take his life. The god of poetry and music, Apollon, suddenly appears and restrains him. Apollon tells Orphée that Euridice can be restored to life: Orphée's songs will be able to move Pluton, king of the Underworld, and he will thus be able to win back Euridice. Orphée decides to undertake the journey while the nymphs and shepherds pay their last homage to Euridice on earth.

INTERMISSION

PART II

La Descente d’Orphée aux Enfers*The Descent of Orpheus to the Underworld*

Act II

The Underworld

Three condemned criminals—Ixion, bound to a wheel in constant rotation; Tantale, condemned to an eternal hunger and thirst; and Titye, whose liver is eaten by vultures—mourn their terrible fate. But Orphée has reached the Underworld and the three experience relief from their eternal punishments: the songs of Orphée soothe both furies and the damned.

Pluton and Proserpine, king and queen of the Underworld, appear. Pluton is surprised to see a mortal alive in the dominion of the dead and warns about the possible consequences of such an irregular presence. Orphée explains that Euridice is the object of his descent into the Underworld. Proserpine is moved, and so are the ghosts: they ask him to tell them more about his troubles. Orphée recounts the tale of Euridice’s untimely death, and asks that his beloved be returned to life.

Pluton refuses, but Proserpine and the shades intercede on Orphée’s behalf. Proserpine tells Orphée to use all the charms of his singing to affect Pluton, which he does by recalling how Pluton abducted Proserpine from the earth because of his love for her. Pluton finally yields, and promises that Euridice will follow her faithful lover back to the world above. But the god makes a condition: Orphée’s gaze must not fall upon his beloved before they have left the dominion of night.

After a moment of doubt, wondering how he will succeed at such a difficult test, Orphée begins his journey back to the light with Euridice. The inhabitants of the underworld ask Orphée to stay longer, but they derive great consolation from the sweet memory of his enchanting voice.

La Couronne de Fleurs*The Crown of Flowers*

Final Scene

A Grove

Pan, the god of forests, appears to call a halt to the contest, as Louis’s exploits are too great a subject for pastoral voices. The shepherds obey, but they express their regrets at being unable to obtain the coveted crown of flowers. Flore decides to award each of the contestants with a flower from the crown. Gods and shepherds wish that as Louis is the master of the world, he may also become the master of time and live a hundred years to see a hundred springs.