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'Médée': Intrigue and Vengeance Revel in the Sounds of Cherubini

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The Medea legend has been catnip to opera composers. The Grove Dictionary of Opera lists six versions. Paris produced two important settings in French: Charpentier's "Médée" in 1693 and Cherubini's opera of the same name a century later.

Cherubini's "Médée" survives more hardily in Italian translation, but Peter Tiboris's Manhattan Philharmonic returned to the original language in an opera-in-concert evening at Carnegie Hall on Saturday night. Seven principals sang on one side of the stage; five actors added dramatic readings in English on the other.

Grand opera thinks big, and the vengeful barbarian queen — guilty of most imaginable felonies and quite a few deadly sins as well — is as big as they get. Murder arrives in several varieties, including infanticide. Lethal intrigue is mother's milk.

Medea's abandonment by her husband, Jason, and the horrific retribution she visits on their children has made her a kind of menacing pagan goddess hovering over the modern divorce court. Medea may not be justifiably homicidal, but in the anger of every spurned wife, and in the hearts of us all, is a compelling sympathy for her suffering. Myth tells us about ourselves, none more so than this one.

If posterity has not been kind to Cherubini, his own time treated him well. A transplanted Italian and contemporary of Mozart, he lived into his 80's, revered among the French as composer, musical administrator and longtime head of the Paris Conservatory. Musicologists are happiest when composers fall into categories. The Cherubini of "Médée," somewhat like Mendelssohn, falls into the historical cracks.

He speaks the language of the late 18th century, but the opera's abrupt transitions, unusual harmonic shifts and general high drama look forward to Rossini and beyond.

Maria Callas made much of the title role; our chances to hear the piece, especially in French, are rare. It is a working proposition in this city that those with enough enterprise to put on operas like this will never have the resources to do them properly. Mr. Tiboris's effort — with a good orchestra and the strong Russian Chamber Chorus of New York in front of him — brought us something literate, comprehensible if not always terribly elegant. It is a seller's market. Listeners take what they can get and are grateful.

The singers came from Greece, Romania, Spain, Italy, Belgium and the United States. None were household names, and all were probably happy to add Carnegie Hall to their credits. Attila Fekete's Jason featured a healthy tenor voice with a dynamic range from loud to louder. As Créon, Marc Claesen's bass was finer, if more muted. Simona Bertini's Dircé tended toward glare and musical untidiness. Ketty Ballester's statuesque presence as Nérís belied the relative anonymity of her voice.

In the title role, the Greek singer Irimi Tsirakidou had the good sense to finish strong. Her soprano made the big sound when asked. The top notes are astringent, but they carry and do so with a presence the quieter singing can't quite manage. One was grateful for the passion and forgiving of occasional waywardness. Ms. Tsirakidou gives the impression of a major technique in the making that never really found itself. The speakers were Lisa Carter, Anthony Cochrane, Robert Richmond, Jessica Boevers and Lisa Harrow.