

David et Jonathas by Marc-Antoine Charpentier



Previous developments

In his palace, Saul King of Israel receives the shepherd David who vanquished the giant Goliath and whose singing soothes his tortured heart. Yet Saul distrusts David, whom he suspects of intending to depose him. The friendship between David and his son Jonathas only stirs up his fears. In a fit of rage, he throws his spear at David, who runs away from the court and takes refuge with Israel's enemies, the Philistines, and their king Achis. But the Philistine warlords, jealous of his fame, cast him out.

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

After David has defeated the Amalekites, the Philistines call him back to their camp. Warriors, shepherds and captives freed by David sing his praise. Left alone, the young man laments: he fears that his return with the Philistines will lead him to wage war against Israel and his friend Jonathas. But King Achis prepares to meet with Saul in order to reach a truce. He leaves his decision to David who pleads for peace.

ACT II

Joabel, commander of the Philistine army, exhorts David to war but he resists him. Envious of David's glory, Joabel becomes angry: he decides to feed Saul's suspicions so as to break the truce. Meanwhile, David meets with Jonathas again and they both celebrate the charms of peace.

ACT III

During his negotiations with Achis, Saul tells him of his distrust of David and entreats him to kill the youth, which Achis refuses.

When David appears before Saul, the latter accuses him of treason and asks Jonathas to avenge him. But Jonathas turns aside, increasing the king's anger. Terrified by the scene, David goes away, an evasion that reinforces Saul's suspicions. He runs after him while Joabel rejoices at the success of his slander.

Intermediate scene (prologue of the original work)

Doubting God's support, Saul goes to a pythoness and asks her to summon the ghost of Samuel, the renowned ruler he succeeded. Yielding to the soothsayer's incantations, the Shadow of Samuel appears and announces to Saul that Heaven has forsaken him.

ACT IV

Knowing that the truce is to be broken, David prays to Heaven. Jonathas finds him and criticizes his avoiding him. In despair, the two friends must part. Now alone, Jonathas is torn: should he follow his friend and abandon his father? The sound of fighting prompts him to join the belligerents and protect David. Saul breaks the truce by hurling abuse at Achis. Joabel is glad that the king of the Philistines eventually decides to engage in combat.

ACT V

At the height of the battle, Jonathas is seriously injured. Saul takes it out on the guards who accompany him and, at the peak of fury, returns to fight against David. While the Philistines are victorious, David comes to the bedside of Jonathas who expires in his arms. David unleashes his despair. Fatally wounded, Saul tries in vain to strike him in a final burst. Achis proclaims David new king of Israel. But amid songs of victory, the victor is distraught: "I lost everything I love / All is lost for me."

Alain Perroux - Festival d'Aix-en-Provence

BACKGROUND

A work that is unique in our operatic repertoire, *David et Jonathas*, which is not quite an opera, could have disappeared after its premiere in 1688 like numerous other scores composed in the 17th century to accompany productions performed outside the Opéra.

Jean-Baptiste Lully, who had founded this institution for his own works, had just died, yet the repertoire was monopolized by his output. Besides, musical edition was expensive and out of reach as regards pieces intended for ephemeral occasions such as carnivals, private balls or religious ceremonies.

Many works of the Grand Siècle have been lost in this way. Some have reached us in print form – due to copyright registration at the Bibliothèque royale – and others as manuscripts kept in private libraries, whose collections were sometimes transferred to local archives after the Revolution. In both cases, a patron had paid for the engraving and the copyist.

The score to *David et Jonathas* was copied during Charpentier's lifetime by Louis XIV's librarian, Philidor the Elder, who kept evidence of the reign's masterpieces at the king's (private) library. Even though he had been kept away from the Opéra and the court by Lully, Marc-Antoine Charpentier was one of the most renowned composers of sacred music in the kingdom. And the musical pieces he had written for the carnival performance produced at the Collège Louis-le-Grand in 1688 had to be preserved.

Had the Jesuit institution not obtained royal status a few years earlier in 1683? Had the sung and danced interludes in question not been highly successful? Although intended to accompany the required Latin tragedy, did they not exhibit a unity of design and a grandiose character that related them to the acts of an opera?

Charpentier's œuvre helps us to understand the diversity of musical life during the Grand Siècle, not concentrated in major royal institutions such as the Chapelle royale and the Opéra but, despite the monarchy's

centralizing will, highly vigorous on secondary stages, in aristocratic salons and religious (and educational) centers.

Twice a year, when the most prestigious school in Paris opened its doors for carnival and end of year festivals, the elegant audience thronged the thoroughly rearranged Louis-le-Grand courtyard. Amid magnificent scenery, the pupils performed in costumes in Latin plays on religious subject matters that exhibited teaching excellence and put into practice the qualities required to appear in society: carriage and poise, declamation and eloquence. As in Rotrou's *Saint-Genest*, it was believed that portraying a virtuous character uplifted the performer's soul.

However, Latin was hardly understood by all the audience and the charm of these productions lay in the interludes, often as ballets performed by pupils between the acts of a tragedy. Familiar with comédie-ballet and very fond of vocal music, Charpentier had endowed the 1687 carnival with sung and danced interludes which, when performed successively, formed a work of its own, *Celse martyr*. The work, now lost, was a resounding success probably thanks to professional actors.

In February 1688 Charpentier endeavored to compose a virtually self-contained work, *David et Jonathas*, with the same librettist, Father François Bretonneau (1660-1741). The subject was dictated by the Latin tragedy on the figure of King Saul drawn from the Old Testament (Books of Samuel) that was recurrent in the Jesuit repertoire. The sung prologue opened the show, followed by alternating spoken acts in Latin and sung acts in French. Latin was for action scenes, focusing on Saul and his gradual downfall as leader of the Israelites. French and singing were devoted to the expression of the feelings. Saul's son, Jonathas, and his friend David, chosen by God to reign over Israel, became the protagonists, and the choruses, representing the peoples involved, gave comments in the spirit of antiquity. While the latter were sung by pupils, the solo parts were presumably performed by invited professionals,

except perhaps for Jonathas whose soprano tessitura is that of a boy prior to voice break.

As was to be expected, the purpose was moral. Since the Fronde King David had been one of the models of monarchy, especially that of divine right. Prince Jonathan's voluntary submission to a shepherd chosen by God induced the aristocracy to serve Louis XIV unconditionally. Obedience was regarded as a supreme virtue, ambition as folly.

Devoid of female characters – except for a disturbing pythoness sung by a haute-contre – almost without any action or recitative, *David et Jonathas* is related to oratorio whose genre was introduced in France by Charpentier. Yet the unfailing friendship of David and Jonathas and the confrontation of communities around them make it resemble an archaic and spiritual Romeo and Juliet.

Our production, premiered at the Aix-en-Provence Festival on 6 July 2012, makes the most of the work's dramatic potential. The fruit of a close collaboration between William Christie and Andreas Homoki, it endows the prologue and ballets with a new function. The prologue – in which Saul goes to the pythoness and is revealed his fate by the Shadow of Samuel – shifts to the middle of the performance where it plays the role of the infernal act characteristic of French Baroque opera. The music to the ballets is no longer danced but accompanies pantomimes that depict the childhood of David and Jonathas and Saul's moral decay like flashbacks. A female character, Jonathas's mother, is reintroduced by way of pantomime. Finally, the whole drama is transferred from the religious – the conflict between the Jews and the Philistines – to the ethnic and intercommunity level.

The love between David and Jonathas, which was long deemed to be a metaphor of the love between Jesus and the Christians, is expressed in a way that resonates quite differently in our secular society. It has become a symbol of homosexual love, proof of the infinite richness of biblical texts. Our production does not overlook this perspective but throws light on it. Considered a masterpiece in its time for its original

dramatic formula, today *David et Jonathas* is remarkable for the freshness of its musical language and its moral significance.

The exercise of power, which became a major theme of opera in the Romantic era, is viewed here in its double relation to responsibility and loyalty. A burning issue of the hour reaches us from the century of absolute monarchy.

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