

Cherubini's *Medea*

By Carol Crocca

Luigi Cherubini's *Medea* is the only one of his operas produced today, its return to the repertory occasioned by Maria Callas' adoption of the role in 1953 at the Florence Festival. Originally written in French (*Médée*, 1797) it is the Italian version that has prevailed, the whole translated and the original French spoken dialog replaced by Italian recitative. Considered his masterpiece, it was admired by Beethoven, who regarded Cherubini as his greatest contemporary and studied it before composing *Fidelio*, and it was admired later by other German composers, including Wagner and Brahms.

Cherubini (1760-1842), the son of a harpsichordist, was born and trained in his native Italy; his precocious talent was recognized by the Duke of Tuscany, who sponsored his education with Giuseppe Sarti, a leading composer of the day. His early works were not especially successful in Italy and in 1784 he went to London where two traditional operas, a seria and a buffa, perhaps because of poor performances, likewise received no special recognition.



Maria Callas in formidable form in 'Medea'. Picture: Getty

In 1787 Cherubini moved to Paris, where a struggle for supremacy between the supporters of Italian style, led by Piccinni, and the devotees of Gluck's more modern ideas was still fomenting rivalry and furor in the opera world. An early Paris opera by Cherubini, composed as a vehicle for the Italian side, was not particularly well received. But with Giuseppe Viotti, a violinist and composer with influence, and some connection in the royal household, he founded a new theater, intended for the promotion of Italian opera, and became a noted figure in Parisian musical life. The advent of the revolution brought the rejection of buffa and a demand for a new style of opera. Renaming the theater 'The Feydeau' in 1789, they looked for a model to the French *opera comique*. Cherubini's opera *Lodoiviska* (1791), a so-called "rescue opera*" set in Poland, was greatly acclaimed. The revolutionary audience wanted "subjects of contemporary relevance, with heroic deeds, highly charged action, exotic settings, and cataclysmic climaxes." (Holden, Amanda, ed., The New Penguin Opera Guide, p.173). Cherubini composed four highly successful operas, between 1791 and 1797, including *Medee*. His subsequent operas, although praised by such as Haydn, never caught on with the public and in his later years, he wrote church music, including two very well-regarded Requiem Masses.

Medea has a wonderful overture and Act 1 is marked by a beautiful aria with Jason later joined by others and the chorus. The mood darkens when Medea arrives. She inspires our sympathy at first, but her parting words presage the cruel revenge she will exact. In Act 2, after her unsuccessful plea to King Creon for mercy, she realizes that her cause is hopeless, and collapses on the steps, whereupon her silence is accompanied by a moving aria by her servant Neris. Afterwards, she forms her plan to punish Jason by murdering his children, and at the beginning of Act 3, she chillingly invokes the infernal gods to aid her, afraid she will be weakened by her love and pity for the children. Apparently, the gods come to her aid, for the in horrific conclusion she executes her vengeful purpose.

Although based on a Greek myth and not contemporary themes, the now-popular Cherubini's work used the resources of new stagecraft, well-liked adventure plots, spectacular endings, and orchestral music that heightens the dramatic tension. His skill in creating dramatic dialog between two characters molded "a voice line to the ebb and flow of verbal rhythms and meanings." (Parker,ed., The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera, p.129.) *Medee* certainly has a cataclysmic ending, the death of the children accompanied by the burning temple. Some of these elements anticipate the Romantic period to follow in the 19th century.

*Rescue opera: a category of *opera comique* in which the hero or heroine is threatened by a natural catastrophe, a villainous outlaw, or an unjust ruler, and is rescued at the last moment by a person showing great personal courage and heroism. It was popular in France in the decade between the fall of the monarchy and the rise of Napoleon. Randell, D. M., ed., The Harvard Dictionary of Music, 4th ed., Belknap Press, 2003.