



Exploring *Semele* with Sir John Eliot Gardiner

By Thomas Guthrie

I've known Sir John Eliot Gardiner for many years. I grew up not far from his sister and her family in York before singing for him in the period leading up to and beyond the *Bach Cantata Pilgrimage* project in 2000. During that year, we visited Barcelona, and the Palau de la Música. I remember being stunned by the architecture, and the sense of being in such an important musical centre. Fifteen years later, after I left to pursue my interest in theatre, John Eliot and I met again at the Royal Opera House in London (another centre of musical excellence), when I was working as an assistant to David McVicar on his production of *Le Nozze di Figaro*. As luck would have it, following *Semele* this spring, John Eliot and I will work together on the same production of *Figaro*, when I revive it at ROH in June.

I am delighted that John Eliot invited me to stage *Semele* with him this year. I know what an important piece it is for him, having recorded it many years ago and being among the first Handel operas he conducted.

The performance of *Semele* in Barcelona (as in London, Paris, Milan and Rome) will be a concert staging. This is a label I prefer to 'semi-staging', where expectations can be raised beyond what is helpful. There is nothing 'semi' or half-hearted about a good concert staging. In my opinion, they are difficult to beat as far as evenings of dramatic opera go. Allowing the music to sit centre stage, literally and metaphorically, allowing the public to see the players, allowing the storytelling to come through the text and the music and the manner of performing it - these things can lead to some of the most viscerally powerful performances. Why? Because, I think, without recourse to sets and elaborate realistic or heavily conceptual staging, it is possible - indeed necessary - to inspire the imagination of the audience. In fact, I believe this should be the goal of all good theatre makers, in whatever situation. Not what *we* think, as re-tellers of the story, but what the storytelling through music and text can inspire the viewer/listener to think for themselves - this is what can generate a truly unique and satisfying theatrical experience, in any setting.

This is particularly important when the story in question is a myth. To me, myths are stories of relevance to the entire human race, of any time. They externalise common human psychological traits, and as such enable us to recognise and explore our inner worlds as if they were outside us. That we should imagine for ourselves, find our own internal references, react to the story on a personal level without much 'guidance' or interference from a director or designer is therefore critical in realising the true value of the story.

Added to this, *Semele* was conceived as an opera dressed up as an oratorio, for reasons of political convenience and financial necessity at the time. It was envisaged with dramatic characterisation and clarity in mind, but not the paraphernalia of theatrical wizardry so popular at the time.

So performing *Semele* in a concert staging, with these wonderful musicians and collaborators, is in many ways the ideal way to do it.

As always, the human aspect is key. Like much opera of its time, Handel's theatrical music requires a certain level of stylisation. To treat it in a purely naturalistic way cannot work, or not in any modern sense of what we mean by naturalism. The chorus in *Semele*, for instance, work as a Greek chorus, commentating on as well as participating in the action. Realism is not the goal: artifice is apparent. But being touched as a human -



that is essential, and, alongside the genius of Handel's music, something that any staging must strive to achieve.

The themes in *Semele* must be treated with a light touch. Part comedy, part morality play, the story concerns a mortal who falls in love with - and whose love is reciprocated by - the god of gods, Jupiter (Zeus in the original Greek myth before Ovid included it in his *Metamorphoses* book 3). In the Greek version they have a child, Bacchus, god of wine. But in Ovid's version, adapted into a libretto by Congreve, Semele dies when she insists that her immortal lover reveals himself to her in his proper divine form. As Jupiter, who is tricked into promising her that her wish will be fulfilled, knows well, this is something that will kill her (he'd been dressing himself up as a mortal until that point).

The traditional take on all this is that vanity is to blame. Semele is given a mirror by Juno, disguised as Semele's beloved sister (Juno, Jupiter's wife, is understandably keen to engineer Semele's downfall), and sings the aria '*Myself I shall adore, if I persist in gazing*'. 'Fancy being immortal?', says Juno dressed as Ino, 'you're almost there already. Just make your divine lover promise to come to you in his god-like form!'. But I think there's more to it than that. Semele is in love with Jupiter, as he is in love with her. Because he is a god, and the king of the gods at that, it doesn't get much better for a simple girl from Boeotia, the daughter of local hero Cadmus. And it doesn't get much better for her father either. Powerful people can have powerful influence. So vanity is not the underlying cause. What Semele suffers from is something more human and familiar even than that. What she suffers from is the fear of losing what she loves - and stands to gain from - most. The greater the prize, the bigger the fear, and the more we try to hold on.

With beautiful new costumes designed by artisan Dutch clothes designer Patricia Hofstede and lit by Rick Fisher (Monteverdi 450), our staging keeps the music-making at the heart of the action and showcases a vigorous, energised, stylised style that brings human relationships to the fore.

I'm enormously excited to return to the Palau de Musica. Early next year I will also be making my debut in the Liceu in a re-staging of *Aida*, and am looking forward to working twice in one year in this wonderful region of Spain.

British Director Thomas Guthrie makes his Spanish debut at Palau de la Música on 24 April, directing Handel's *Semele* with the Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists conducted by John Eliot Gardiner.

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This performance is part of a European tour with dates at the Paris Philharmonie, London's Alexandra Palace Theatre, Milan's La Scala, and Rome's Sala Santa Cecilia. - <https://monteverdi.co.uk/projects-semele>