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MUSIC REVIEW | OPERA LAFAYETTE

Love and Sorcery in a Religious War

By [ANTHONY TOMMASINI](#)

Sometimes slight flaws in an otherwise great [opera](#) — say, a convoluted plot twist or impractical vocal demands — can account for the work's neglect. That Gluck's magnificent 1777 "Armide," a seemingly flawless masterpiece, continues to be a rarity is inexplicable.

In decades of operagoing I had encountered "Armide" only once, an earnest student production at the [Juilliard School](#) in 1999, before the concert performance in the Frederick P. Rose Hall of [Lincoln Center](#) on Wednesday night. It was presented by Opera Lafayette, an adventurous period company in Washington celebrating its 15th season.

Like all 18th-century French operas "Armide" abounds with dance. This performance, conducted by Ryan Brown, Opera Lafayette's founding director, featured elaborately costumed ballet segments performed by the New York Baroque Dance Company, choreographed by Catherine Turocy. Mr. Brown conducted a stylish and flowing performance, with an admirable cast headed by the lustrous soprano Dominique Labelle in the title role.

For this story of love amid religious war and sorcery, Gluck said he wanted to "produce a voluptuous sensation" through music. He considered "Armide" perhaps his best work, and he may have been right.

The opera has had powerful past champions. Wagner conducted it in Dresden in 1843. Toscanini opened the [Metropolitan Opera](#)'s 1910-11 season with the American premiere performance; the starry cast included Olive Fremstad, in the title role, [Enrico Caruso](#) and Louise Homer. It was last heard at the Met in 1912.

With this five-act opera Gluck paid homage to French tradition by setting the same Philippe Quinault libretto that Lully had used for his "Armide" nearly a century earlier, in 1686. Yet while honoring the past, Gluck set about modernizing French opera. He created a seamless and elegant musical drama, free of ostentatious vocal display, in which ballet segments emerge gracefully from the mythological story.

Armide is an alluring Muslim sorceress and the princess of Damascus at the time of the First

Crusade. After her troops rout the invading crusaders, Renaud, the most valiant crusader, single-handedly liberates his fellow Christians from Armide's jails.

Armide has long used her beauty to control her male enemies. To ensnare the resistant Renaud, she resorts to sorcery, placing him under a spell. Yet in the face of Renaud's adoration, Armide succumbs emotionally. At the end, when Renaud regains his senses and returns to duty, the distraught, furious Armide brings destruction to her own palace and vows revenge.

Gluck's music ebbs and flows with uncanny naturalness. Orchestra-accompanied recitative merges into lyrical arioso and opens up into arias and ensembles that never come across as set pieces. Gluck is an astute psychologist, fleshing out the emotional subtext of every line.

One ingeniously subtle scene comes in Act III, when the smitten Armide sings of Renaud, then talks things over with her confidantes, Phénice and Sidonie (two fine young sopranos, Nathalie Paulin and Judith van Wanroij). Singing with tender longing one moment and steely determination the next, Ms. Labelle conveyed Armide's aching conflicts. Her confidantes counsel indifference to Renaud's passion. This scene seemed strikingly contemporary: just three women talking over the agonies of love.

The tenor William Burden brought a virile voice and subtle expressivity to Renaud. Robert Getchell, a fine lyric tenor, was excellent as Artémidore, Renaud's fellow crusader (and later as a Danish knight). The mezzo-soprano Stephanie Houtzeel stopped the show as La Haine (Hatred), who responds to Armide's call for help in conquering her yearning for Renaud.

Rose Hall was filled for this performance. The time has come for Gluck's "Armide."

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