Vengeance is hers

Vertical Player Repertory brings Milhaud’s forgotten opera ‘Medee’ to Boerum Hill stage

By Kevin Filipski
for The Brooklyn Papers

S
ince French composer Darius Milhaud wrote hundreds of works at lightning speed, the bulk of his output is often consid-
ered lightweight, lacking in true artistry.

But, as the Vertical Player Repertory’s performances of his trag-ic opera “Médée” shows, Milhaud was a composer of considerable skills who was able to utilize his musical economy of means to create great dramatic effects, whether it was in his chamber music, sym-
phonies or stage works.

It’s amazing that “Médée” (composed in 1939) is actually being performed live in Brooklyn at all: this is the first time we’ve had the opportunity to hear one of Milhaud’s operas in person. (It’s only available on CD in brief ex-
cerpts.)

Like that of many other 20th century French composers, Mil-
haud’s music — in spite of its lyricism and accessibility — is rarely

MEDEE...

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Boerum Hill factory, and Mil-
haud’s “Médée” — which has
a libretto by Milhaud’s wife
Madeleine (who is still alive,
as of this writing, at age 104)
and had its premiere in Paris
in 1940 — is a prime exam-
ple of the type of opera it
should be introducing to audi-
ences.

Milhaud’s opera is taken
from the final sections of the Medea tragedy from Greek
mythology which includes the
time Medea’s former husband
Jason is remarried to her final
revenge by killing his new
wife Creuse and Jason and
Medea’s only son. The comp-
pilation of the action into these tab-
eaux, or acts, which are quite
short (approximately
70 minutes total)
congruous with
Milhaud’s economi-
cal music — makes for
a propulsive oper-
atic tragedy of
the first order.

Director Seth Baumriss, in-
spired by the atmosphere sur-
rounding the opera’s creation,
had set the work in Vichy
France during the Nazi occu-
pation. Although this doesn’t
emerge clearly enough (un-
less one reads Baumriss’s pro-
gram notes), the fact remains
that the starkness of his stag-
ing in the group’s dilapidated
but intimate space is perfect
for an opera filled with such vengeful brutality.

Always eloquent and richly
rhetoric, Milhaud’s music is
exquisite on the ears when
performed with the refine-
ment it calls for. For
“Médée,” VPR is performing
a piano reduction of the score,
which unavoidably leavens
the tragic grandeur of Mil-
haud’s original orchestrations.
(One listen to French soprano
Natalie Dessay’s performance of
one of the opera’s arias on her 1997 recital disc from
EMI Classics proves the point.)

Still, when there’s a pianist
of the caliber of Audrey
Saint-Gil — who performs
the score with nimble grace,

strikingly underpinning the
vocal lines and often taking
terrible charge of the drama
— there’s certainly no reason
to consider this a “lesser” ver-
sion of Milhaud’s work.

Conducting with a good
feel for the opera’s musical
and dramatic arcs, Peter Szep
leads an impressive roster of
17 superbly rehearsed singers
to give a tremendously affect-
ing account of this difficult
work.

The dozen singer-actors
who form the work’s Greek
chorus are splendidly through-
out, whether commenting on
the action or participating in
it. In the silent role of Medea
and Jason’s child, Lucia Pom-
peo is properly docile. Mezzo
Twila Ehneke (Medea’s nurse)
and baritone Gustavo

Ahshaal (King Creon) invest
their characters with suitable
dignity.

As Princess Créuse, soprano
Sung Ji Kim sings beautifully,
especially in her upper regis-
ter where her two arias mostly lie. (Kim alternates the
role with Heather Green, who
sings the final performance on
Nov. 19.) Tenor Percy Mur-
tine skillfully registers the
complicated emotions of
Médée’s estranged husband
Jason with the necessary clari-
ty, in keeping with Milhaud’s
musical conception of the role.

And, in the title role, Judith
Barnes uses her strong soprano
voice to create a truly tragic
anti-heroine. In her power-
ful monologue that takes up
all of the second act, Barnes
cuts right to the quick of what
is the emotional center of the
entire opera.

If Vertical Players Reperto-
ary had simply brought
“Médée” to the stage, that
would have been good
enough. But by giving such
an intensely dramatic account
of this forgotten but worthy
20th century opera, it de-
serves our eternal thanks.