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Acteon is a semi-obscure opera from the early Baroque era that deserves more notoriety. Due to its history, themes, musical style, legacy and short runtime, Acteon by Marc-Antoine Charpentier is a perfect study example of the operatic styles of the early Baroque era.

Acteon was written by Marc-Antoine Charpentier sometime between 1683 and 1685, but it's hard to pinpoint an exact year. Many scholars believe that it was originally written for a private viewing and never had a public release. (Witts, 2021)

Very little is known about Charpentier because during his lifetime, he was greatly overshadowed by another great French composer Jean Baptiste Lully. It wasn't until after his passing that a loose bibliography would be created using already dated secondhand accounts. (Couse, 1989) This, however, was relatively standard for the time since record-keeping was nowhere close to as common or consistent as it is now.

What is known is that he was born in France sometime between 1634 and 1645, and he would eventually go to Rome to study music with Giacomo Carissimi. After returning from Rome in 1670, Charpentier worked for the Theatre Francais and its associated troupes for about a decade. (Couse, 1989) Between the years 1685 and 1688, he was hired by the Duchesse de Guise, one of the largest music patrons in France at the time. He also undertook a considerable amount of work for the city of Dauphin, the Jesuit church of Saint-Luis in Rue Saint-Antione, the college of Clermont and a massive number of freelance commissions. (Couse, 1989) Because of the sheer number of different places that his work was going, it is hard to date exactly when Acteon was

written, but it was likely commissioned and written as entertainment for a hunting season during this period. (Witts, 2021)

During the early Baroque era, opera was written with the intent of replicating ancient Greek theater and tales, so it often revolved around the retelling of those fables. Acteon follows this trend by being a retelling of “*Metamorphoses* of Ovid.” (Witts, 2021) This version of the story is told in six scenes and has a just over a forty-minute runtime. (Rousset, 2016) In the first scene the hunter Actaeon and his men are preparing to hunt for a bear that has been causing mischief within their hometown, and they pray to the goddess of the hunt, Diana, to help them out. (Witts, 2021)

The second scene features Dianna and her Nymphs deciding whether they want to bathe in a secret magic river or not, because they have been working hard and want to rest, but also don't want someone to gaze upon them. (Witts, 2021) In Greek myth Diana, vows never to have a lover. In scene three, Actaeon is exhausted from a day of hunting and looks for a place to rest. He accidentally comes across the river where Diana and her nymphs are bathing, and instead of going away, he moves closer to eavesdrop. Diana and the nymphs hear and catch him. They then decide that they have to do something with him so that he can never tell people about his experience. (Witts, 2021) Scene four opens with Dianna turning Actaeon into a stag and him pleading to her and the other gods for her not to. (Witts, 2021) Scene five returns to Actaeon's men as they talk about how good their day hunting was, and they call for Actaeon to group back up with them because he is missing out on his hounds being super riled up over chasing a stag. The scene has an incredible amount of dramatic irony. (Witts, 2021) The opera ends after scene six where Juno, the queen of the gods, shows up to tell the men to stop calling for Actaeon because he is already dead. She then recaps most of the story and the huntsmen sing about how much of a tragedy the whole ordeal was. (Witts, 2021)

From the story's roots as a Greek myth to the summary of the tragedy at the end, Acteon follows about every opera story cliché from the early baroque era. This, coupled with a relatively short runtime, makes it a great example to be studied for writing practices of the early Baroque era. It also musically fits well into its time.

One of the most prevalent stylistic touchstones of the baroque era was its approach to rhythm and harmonic texture. Both of which can be seen within just the first system of Acteon's overture, with a relatively consistent use of trills and a basso continuo to create a simple notation of the constantly changing complex harmonic texture.

Full Score

Overture de l'Opéra d'Actéon

The image shows a musical score for the Overture de l'Opéra d'Actéon. It consists of three staves: a treble staff, an alto staff, and a bass staff. The music is written in a style characteristic of the early Baroque era, featuring a complex harmonic texture with frequent trills and a basso continuo line. The bass staff includes figured bass notation, which is a shorthand for the harmonic structure. The notation includes various notes, rests, and trills, indicating a highly ornamented melody. The overall style is typical of the early Baroque period, emphasizing rhythmic and harmonic complexity.

(Petrucci Music, 2007)

Here is a separate example showing the basso continuo in isolation.

Ouverture de l'Opéra d'Actéon

(Petrucci Music, 2007)

Both of these elements were extremely common for the time in place. This opera also repeatedly uses a dramatic call and repeats between voices, where one voice will start a phrase and the rest of the voices within a scene will answer in a rhythmic unison that creates a much larger harmony. It's extremely common in opera, but it's easy to appreciate because of the iconic over-the-top drama and energy that it creates.

baroque operas and how it treats its rhythm, harmony and part writing, all while being a notably quick watch for an opera.

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