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Charles T. Downey

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Review of Nicholas Harnoncourt and the Theater an der Wien, *Il Mondo della Luna*.

by Charles T. Downey

Joseph Haydn. *Il Mondo della Luna*.

Nicholas Harnoncourt, Concentus Musicus Wien

Bahrman, Beaumont, Geneaux, Henschel, Landshamer, Richter, Schäfer

Tobias Moretti, Theater an der Wien

DVD 703508, C Major Entertainment, GmbH

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JOSEPH HAYDN
IL MONDO DELLA LUNA

Dietrich Henschel · Bernard Richter

Vivica Genaux · Christina Landshamer

NIKOLAUS HARNONCOURT · Concentus Musicus Wien

Staged by Tobias Moretti **THEATER AN DER WIEN**



An ideal constellation: 2009 marked Haydn's anniversary year as well as Nikolaus Harnoncourt's 80th birthday. For this occasion the maestro chose *Il mondo della luna*, a delicious mixture of satire, comedy and science fiction based on a popular comedy by Carlo Goldoni. Haydn's music unleashes a display of fireworks performed with irresistible energy by Harnoncourt and his ensemble. Renowned actor and director Tobias Moretti relates the story as a magical fairy tale infused with slapstick and fantasy costumes. "The piece is extreme, completely insane and very funny. Wherever you puncture the surface of Haydn, you come upon sheer madness." – *Nikolaus Harnoncourt*

JOSEPH HAYDN

IL MONDO DELLA LUNA

ECCLITICO
ERNESTO
BUONAFEDE
CLARICE

BERNARD RICHTER
VIVICA GENAUX
DIETRICH HENSCHEL
CHRISTINA LANDSHAMER

FLAMINIA ANJA NINA BAHRMANN
LISETTA
CECCO
MAITE BEAUMONT
MARKUS SCHÄFER

Concentus Musicus Wien
NIKOLAUS HARNONCOURT

Staged by TOBIAS MORETTI
Video Director: FELIX BREISACH

Costume Design: HEIDI HACKL
Set Design: RENATE MARTIN,
ANDREAS DONHAUSER
Light Design: OLAF WINTER
Video: HAMID REZA TAVAKOLI



FILMED IN HIGH DEFINITION MASTERED FROM AN HD SOURCE	PICTURE FORMAT NTSC 16:9	SOUND FORMATS PCM 2.0 DTS 5.0	SUBTITLES: ITALIAN (ORIGINAL LANGUAGE) ENGLISH · GERMAN FRENCH · SPANISH	REGION CODE 0 (WORLDWIDE)	TOTAL RUNNING TIME 192 MINS OPERA: 167 MINS BONUS: 25 MINS
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The revival of the Haydn operas really began with the series of recordings undertaken by Philips in the 1970s, still available as a box set. Antal Dorati's recording of *Il Mondo della Luna*, Hob. 28/7, for that set, with the

laser-precise voice of Arleen Auger as Flaminia and the sassy charm of Frederica von Stade as Lisetta, is still a classic. This rather goofy *dramma giocosa*, one of many musical settings of the libretto by Carlo Goldoni, has not been produced all that often since its premiere at Eszterháza on 3 August 1777, as part of the wedding celebrations of Count Nikolaus Esterházy and Countess Maria Anna Wissenwolf. Two modern performances have recently been made available on DVD and Blu-Ray.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt conducted his ensemble Concentus Musicus Wien for the production mounted at the Theater an der Wien in 2009, the year that Bärenreiter published the new critical edition of the opera by Hans-Georg Kluge. C Major released a DVD of the performance (703508) in 2010, recorded live, and it remains, if not unchallenged, the best and easiest-to-find video version of this opera. Harnoncourt's women lead the cast, with a dulcet Clarice from Christina Landshamer and a high-flying Flaminia from Anja-Nina Bahrmann, incandescent on Flaminia's showpiece "Ragion nell'alma siede" in Act I. Maité Beaumont turns in a feisty rendition of Lisetta, a frank and liberated sexpot version of the servant, one indication that the updated staging by Tobias Moretti seems to take up the interpretation of the opera by Rebecca Lee Green, in her dissertation "Power and Patriarchy in Haydn's Goldoni Operas" (University of Toronto, 1995), which lays out a case for *Mondo* as a critique of patriarchy.

The role of Ernesto was created for the castrato Pietro Gherardi, and the florid vocal writing Haydn gave him shows few deletions or modifications in the holograph score preserved in the Esterházy collection. (Photographs taken of most of the pages of that score were made in 1939, at the request of Prince Paul Esterházy as Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia threatened Hungary, and sent to the Library of Congress, with the stipulation that they not be reproduced. The score shows the most changes for the role of Ecclitico, which Haydn had to adapt at the last minute to a different singer.) Here Ernesto was taken by mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux: although the Alaska native is very good at playing trouser roles, the way that she produces vibrato and fast runs by flapping her lips can be very distracting. This is especially true in the many closeups unfortunately featured in the

video direction of Felix Breisach, but the increasing cinematization of opera is not going to change anytime soon.

The male cast is more varied, with Bernard Richter's Ecclitico as a handsome, leather-jacketed rogue, showing some nice resonance at the top of an otherwise not remarkable voice. The same with the Cecco of character tenor Markus Schäfer, who mugs and half-speaks his way through his pieces. Dietrich Henschel's Buonafede is not that vocally special either, but he reveals the character in all of his gullibility in the moon scenes, where he is clothed *en travesti* like Barbara Eden in the television show *I Dream of Jeannie*, another gesture to the critique of patriarchy (costume design by Heidi Hackl). Buonafede's desire to have women subjugated to him, shown in ridiculous scenes he views on the moon (presented in Moretti's staging as a sort of pornography), implies that women actually have the upper hand in this set of characters.

The production updates the action to the 1960s, the era of the rise of the feminist movement and of the earliest actual human exploration of the moon. In Lisetta's Act I aria, about there being no woman like her, Beaumont enters with a bloody cleaver and a hare carcass, creating a certain air of feminine empowerment. Ecclitico's *canocchialone*, or big telescope, is made into a sort of virtual reality machine, with ridiculous video scenes being fed into it by video below, while Ecclitico's students are a bunch of IT nerds, reading tech magazines and staring at screens. The moon elixir is served in a little mini-mixer, like a daiquiri-style cocktail. The moon scenes feature a lot of bright gold aluminum foil material, recalling the designs of the Apollo spacecraft (sets by Renate Martin and Andreas Donhause). Buonafede's daughters arrive on "the moon" via a ski lift marked with the words "Axamer Lizum," the Alpine village near Innsbruck.

In the Act II ballet music, the natural horns and bassoons are moved onto the stage to serenade Buonafede in a little pool, although parts of the staging are lost in the murky lighting design of Olaf Winter. Harnoncourt gives free rein to the louder parts of the score, allowing the trumpets and horns to crash through the texture. The performance is heavy on accents and weighty attack, although this may be partially due to the microphone

placement in the pit, while there is nice variation in continuo accompaniment, alternating between harpsichord and theorbo.

Il Mondo della Luna features prominently in Pierpaolo Polzonetti's recent book *Italian Opera in the Age of the American Revolution*, where it is listed as one of nine different settings of the libretto, in many performances over the period from 1750 to 1792. Haydn's changes to Goldoni's libretto, according to Polzonetti, recast the lunar utopia as a place where "happiness and prosperity" are celebrated, "two key concepts of the American Revolution," underscoring that the 1777 performance occurred one year after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Following Empress Maria Theresa's attempts to break down the old feudal practices among the Hungarian courts, Polzonetti writes, "the Esterházy's were well aware that they suffered from a poor reputation among the more open-minded Austrians." Furthermore, "it is plausible that Haydn chose or accepted" the libretto "because of his engagement with the ideology of the American enlightenment."

The staging possibilities for a production of the opera from this interpretation are fun to contemplate but obviously do not feature in the Vienna performance — unless you count Ernesto's costume as Hesperus, a cross between the Statue of Liberty, Uncle Sam, and Evel Knievel — or in another production at the Teatro Alessandro Bonci di Cesena, also in 2009, that found its way onto DVD around the same time. (A review copy of the Italian DVD was not available at the time of this writing, but one can watch a few excerpts from it on YouTube.) The world glimpsed through the lens of Goldoni's *canocchiale* could be not the moon but an idealistic country in Earth's other hemisphere, where a serving maid could become someone's empress -- perhaps just as foreign to the world of Eszterháza, where Haydn wore his employer's livery.