

Paisiello - Il divertimento dei numi (2002)

Written by bluesever

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Paisiello composed music from 1764 to 1808, with more than 80 operas to his credit. This little 72-minute “scherzo” (as it’s referred to in the accompanying notes) concerns a bored Jupiter, who kidnaps three mortals, lifts them to the Elysian Fields, knocks them out, and dresses them as the gods Mars, Venus, and himself. Soon Mars and Jupiter (both basses) begin bickering and competing for Venus (soprano) who first plays one against the other and then tries to reason with them. Tensions escalate until Mars hits Jupiter on the head and he passes out. When he revives, Jupiter sets fire to his throne and the real Jupiter (tenor) has to intercede. When he returns the mortals to their true selves he tells them they will be punished for their

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behavior, but after they implore him, he mercifully allows them to hang around the Elysian Fields. The libretto is actually very funny.

There are choruses of followers of Mars and Jupiter, each mock-god has an aria and takes part in many verbal confrontations, Venus has two arias, and there's a terzetto near the end. It's a clever divertissement, and had I been in Naples in 1774 I would have been happy to attend. The scoring is for a full orchestra, with a few interesting moments in which the bassoon is given prominence.

Listening to this on CD you have to work hard to picture the rambunctiousness, and this performance, taped live in Rovigo in November, 2000, should be closely followed with the libretto (which isn't exactly in sync with what's performed) for full effect. The numbers are brief. Mars is a braggart and bass Alessandro Calamai is the more buffo of the two basses; the false Jupiter, Giampaolo Fiocchi, has a more ingratiating sound and characteristically sings with less silly emphasis. Claudia Marchi as Venus sounds more like a mezzo (the role lies low), but she's sincere and "plays" well. The real Jupiter is an okay tenor who tries to sound authoritative in his accompanied recitatives. In other words, they all sing well, without any great distinction. The chorus—often interjected with soloists—is good without being spectacular. I wish the conductor had led the singers and band to embellish their lines and had ensured that attacks and tempos were more fierce and snappy, but it's a good enough performance of a rarity that we'll otherwise probably never hear. A diversion, as the title says. --- Robert Levine, classicstoday.com

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