

John Blow - Venus & Adonis (1999)

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Venus & Adonis (A Masque For The Entertainment Of The King) 1 Overture 2:40 The Prologue
2 Cupid, Chorus: "Behold My Arrows And My Bow" 0:49 3 Shepherds, Shepherdess: "Come Shepherds All" 1:59 4 Cupid: "Courtiers There Is No Faith In You" 0:47 5 Chorus, Shepherds, Shepherdess: "In These Sweet Groves" 2:35 6 Cupid's Ent 1:17 7 The Act Tune 1:33 8 Adonis, Venus: "Venus! Adonis!" 2:06 9 Hunter's Music, Venus: "Hark, Hark The Rural Music Sounds" 1:09 10 Adonis, Venus: "Adonis Will Not Hunt Today" 2:27 11 Huntsman, Adonis, Chorus: "Come, Follow The Noblest Game" 2:33 12 Entry: A Dance By A Huntsman 1:01

Act II

13 The Act Tune 2:53 14 Cupid, Venus: "You Place With Such Delightful Care" 1:42 15 Cupid, Little Cupids: The Cupid's Lesson: "The Insolent, The Arrogant" 1:35 16 Cupid: "Choose For The Fomal Fool" 1:37 17 A Dance Of Cupids 1:35 18 Venus: "Call The Graces" 0:52 19 Chorus Of The Graces: "Mortals Below, Cupids Above" 1:27 20 The Graces' Dance 1:18 21 Gavatt 0:47 22 Saraband For The Graces 1:36 23 A Ground 1:39 24 The Act Tune 2:09

Act III

25 Venus, Adonis: "Adonis, Uncall'd For Sighs" 5:06 26 Venus: "With Solemn Pomp Let Mourning Cupids Bear" 2:26 27 Chorus: "Mourn For Thy Servant" 3:22

Baritone [Adonis] – Gerald Finley Bass [Shepherds, Graces] – Jonathan Brown Countertenor [Cupid, Graces] – Robin Blaze Countertenor [Shepherds, Huntsman] – Christopher Josey Soprano [Little Cupids] – Sopranos Du Chœur Soprano [Shepherdess, Graces] – Maria Cristina Kiehr Soprano [Venus] – Rosemary Joshua Tenor [Shepherds] – John Bowen The Choir Of Clare College Orchestra Of The Age Of Enlightenment René Jacobs - conductor

John Blow described Venus and Adonis as a masque, but for all intents and purposes, it's an opera, as fully as Dido and Aeneas is, and it should make anyone who considers the Purcell the first English opera think again. The two works have much in common in their dramatic structure, subject matter, length, and level of musical expressiveness. Based on the quality of Blow's work, it's surprising that the piece isn't frequently programmed on a double bill with Dido and

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Aeneas. Venus' response to the death of Adonis isn't as melodically memorable as Dido's famous lament, but it's as deeply felt and as poignant. Blow's libretto, by an anonymous writer, is superior to Nahum Tate's text for the Purcell on almost every count; the characters have more individuality and their interactions are less mannered. It even has moments of genuine humor. In one scene, Cupid comically instructs a band of adorable little cupids-in-training in the skills required to ensnare lovers. When Venus asks Cupid how to guarantee Adonis' continued affection, he replies, "Use him very ill," at which she bursts into irrepressible laughter. Blow's music is a revelation: deeply expressive, emotionally direct, richly varied, distinctively British (some of his melodies evoke Celtic folk song), witty, and always elegant. René Jacobs brings his considerable gifts as an interpreter of music of the Baroque to the little opera, and this 1998 performance by the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and the Clare College Chapel Choir is luminous. The soloists are all first-rate. Soprano Rosemary Joshua as Venus, baritone Finley as Adonis, and counter tenor Robin Blaze sing radiantly, creating memorably etched characters, and the singers in the supporting roles are equally effective. Any fan of Baroque opera, or any fan of opera, for that matter, should find much to please in this stellar performance of a forgotten masterpiece. ---Stephen Eddins, AllMusic Review

John Blow's little masterpiece of concision, which he termed a "Masque for the Entertainment of the King," has long held a special place in my affections. Despite Blow's description, it is of course not a masque but a full-fledged opera with a prolog and three acts that are sung throughout, in addition to including dances. And thereby lies the problem, for Venus and Adonis had the misfortune to be composed at almost exactly the same time as another opera cast in nearly identical mold, and ever since heralded as the (and only) great English Baroque opera—Dido and Aeneas. In fact, Blow's work, first given at the court of Charles I between 1681 and 1683, almost certainly predates Dido, and almost equally certainly exerted no small influence on Purcell. Furthermore, at the risk of enraging Purcellians (of whom I count myself one), the presumed and accepted superiority of Dido seems to me to be open to question. In at least one respect Venus strikes me as distinctly superior. Although based on a story from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, the plot has a universal theme that is more dramatically convincing than that of Purcell's work, where it is difficult to reconcile the proud queen's love for Aeneas and her ultimate suicide with the actions of such a spineless "hero." The tragedy of Venus and Adonis, on the other hand, a story of the loss through accidental death of a loved one, has powerful and timeless resonance. Venus may have no great tragic air to sing on the occasion of the death of Adonis, but her final words are as poignant as anything in opera, and the great, final lamenting chorus, "Mourn for thy servant," is surely fully the equal of "With drooping wings," its counterpart in Dido.

There is a further historical point to be made about supposed influence (raised in the notes and

repeated in at least two reviews of the present issue) on Venus and Adonis of Lullian tragédie lyrique, in particular Charpentier's Actéon. While Blow's opera may pay a certain homage to the French taste of Charles II (obvious in the French-style overture and dances), its expressive power leans far more toward Italian models, while the supposed influence of Actéon is founded on nothing more than the hunting link between the two operas and is entirely specious, recent research dating Charpentier's work from 1684, later than any date suggested for Venus.

Venus and Adonis has been lucky on disc in the CD era, this being the fourth version, all of which have very positive merits. First in the field was the earlier Harmonia Mundi version, with Lynne Dawson a radiant Venus. Following hard on its heels came a DHM recording with Anthony Rooley's Consort of Musick forces, of particular value on its initial appearance, since the two-CD set also included the only recorded version of Matthew Locke's fine masque, Cupid and Death. That recording also probably remains the closest in scale to the original court performance, its chamber proportions further distinguished by the touching and beautifully sung Venus of Emma Kirkby. Some four or five years later Philip Pickett's recording featured yet another highly successful Venus in Catherine Bott, perhaps the most sensuously sung of all recorded assumptions of the role. Jacobs's choice of Rosemary Joshua represents something of a departure, for hers is not a natural early-music voice. Bigger, rounder, and more voluptuous, hers is what one might term a Rubens Venus (quickly adding that the analogy is to the voice, not an illusion to the lady's figure). That also brings the disadvantage of rather more vibrato at times than one might like, but it is a minor price to pay for an expressive power that never steps beyond the bounds of style. Lovingly persuasive in her act I exchanges with Adonis, delightfully playful in the act II lesson of the Little Cupids, almost unbearably grief-stricken at the climax of the opera, Joshua is an utterly convincing proponent of the role in all its facets. She is fortunate in her Adonis, for Gerald Finlay's is unquestionably the best I've heard, a manly, virile-sounding hero whose youthful death is therefore the more moving. The other parts are cast in strength, Jacobs's choice of a male alto for Cupid vindicated by the characterful and excellently sung performance of Robin Blaze, while to have an artist of the stature of Maria Cristina Kiehr in the small role of the Shepherdess is luxury casting indeed. The whole production is in fact marked by the same vivid theatrical projection and care for diction that Jacobs brought to his revelatory *Così fan tutte*. Right from the richly detailed account of the overture he draws superlative playing from the OAE, giving full value to Blow's bold harmonies, and a dynamic rhythmic buoyancy to the dances. ---Brian Robins, classicalacarte.net

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