

The Teatro Real rediscovers the opera *Achille in Sciro (Achilles in Skyros)*, by Francesco Corselli, 275 years after its premiere in Madrid

## THE BIRTH OF A HERO

- There were planned 8 performances of the opera between March 17 and 28 in a new production of the Teatro Real which confirms its commitment to recover Spanish operatic repertoire.
- *Achilles in Skyros* was first seen in Madrid in 1744 to celebrate the marriage of the Infanta of Spain, María Teresa Rafaela, daughter of Philip V, to the Dauphin of France, Louis, son of Louis XV.
- For her production of this opera, [Mariame Clément](#) – who previously staged *Platée*, by Rameau, composed to commemorate the same marriage – recreates the premiere of *Achilles in Skyros* in Madrid through the eyes of the Spanish Infanta, who takes on a very important dramatic role in this new staging.
- The set designs and costumes of [Julia Hansen](#) evoke the liberty and fantasy of the Baroque period and the dreamlike atmosphere of a mythological universe.
- The Musical Director of the Teatro Real, [Ivor Bolton](#) leads the [two casts](#), the Coro Titular del Teatro Real and the [Orquesta Barroca de Sevilla](#).
- The original score of the opera is in the Biblioteca Histórica Municipal Conde Duque in Madrid; it was recovered by the [Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales \(ICCMU\)](#) and has been edited by musicologist [Álvaro Torrente](#).
- *Achilles in Skyros* will be broadcast live by [ARTE TV](#) on March 27 at 8 p.m. in an audio-visual coproduction between François Roussillon, Arte TV, Mezzo and RTVE. Subsequently it will be available on DVD and in the catalogue of [My Opera Player](#), the audio-visual platform of the Teatro Real.
- On March 25 at 8 p.m. a recorded performance of the opera will be aired for member countries of the European Broadcasting Union ([EBU](#)), and on March 28 at 8 p.m. the opera will be broadcast throughout Spain by [Radio Clásica, de RNE](#).
- Coinciding with *Achilles in Skyros* a number of parallel events have been organised in the Teatro Real, Museo del Prado, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Museo Nacional de Escultura de Valladolid, Fundación Juan March, Biblioteca Nacional, Círculo de Bellas Artes, Institut Français de Madrid and the Fundación SGAE.

### ALL CANCELLED

- From March 25-27, the Teatro Real will host the [Congreso Internacional de Musicología Parole del Metastasio](#), bringing together philologists and musicologists who are authorities on the legacy of the librettist.
- The performances of *Achilles in Skyros* are made possible with the patronage of the Junta de Amigos del Teatro Real.

## ACHILLE IN SCIRO, BY FRANCESCO CORSELLI

### Historical context

In 18th century Europe, religious wars gave way to battles of a territorial nature of continuous treaties, alliances and pacts, many of which were sealed with royal marriages. This was the framework for the union between the Infanta of Spain María Teresa Rafaela, daughter of Philip V and Elisabeth Farnese, and the French Dauphin, Louis, son of Louis XV. They were married by proxy in Madrid on December 18, 1744 while the official wedding took place at Versailles on February 23, 1745. With this alliance, it was hoped that the tension between both countries would be appeased.

To commemorate the marriage of the future King and Queen of France – who never reigned due to their premature deaths – two musical works were composed: *Achille in Sciro* by **Francesco Corse**lli, inaugurated the wedding festivities at the Coliseo del Palacio del Buen Retiro in Madrid on December 8, 1744, in the presence of the Infanta and the King and Queen of Spain, prior to the young bride departing for France; *Platée* by **Jean-Philippe Rameau**, was presented at the Grand Écurie of Versailles for the French Royal family a month after the nuptials.

A year after the wedding celebrations, the Spanish Infanta died in childbirth in Paris and her daughter would die at the age of 2. The Dauphin of France lived another 20 years with his second wife; however, he died of tuberculosis before ever ascending the throne.

*Achilles in Skyros* will be seen for the second time in Madrid this spring, 275 years after its premiere. However, now we know that the marriage for which it was composed certainly did not have the happy ending of the opera.

### Francesco Corselli (1705-1778)

**Francesco Corse**lli was born in Piacenza, the son of Charles Courcelle, the French dancing master of Elisabeth Farnese in Parma. He was trained as a composer in Parma and Venice, where he premiered his two operas. In 1733, Corselli came to Spain. Later, he was named maestro of the Capilla Real (Royal Chapel) where he remained for four decades. His important Italian influence on the royal household was reinforced by the presence of the famous castrato **Farinelli** (1705-1782), a highly esteemed singer and musical advisor to the Spanish court for the more than 20 years he lived in Madrid.

Corselli's work includes a notable catalogue of primarily religious compositions. These coexisted with the final period of Baroque music in Europe during the mid-18th century, which by then, was deprived of its basic characteristics in favour of more austerity, connecting it with the Classical period. Of his six known operas, two owe their libretto to **Pietro Metastasio** (1698-1782): *Achilles in Skyros* is one of the two. Metastasio was a close friend of **Farinelli**. According to musicologist Álvaro Torrente, Farinelli mediated in the contracts of the librettist, the choice of singers and other details related to the production of the opera.

Pietro Metastasio wrote 27 opera librettos for which nearly 900 musical scores were composed during the 18th century. *Achilles in Skyros*, with the music by Antonio Caldera, was penned in barely 18 days in 1736 to celebrate the marriage of María Teresa of Austria. This same libretto would be used in another 38 operas, nearly all of which, like that of Francesco Corselli, have been largely forgotten.

### **Achille in Sciro by Francesco Corselli**

*The tessituras of the interpreters in the Teatro Real production are in parenthesis.*

The opera narrates the entertaining episode in the life of Achilles (**Achile**, contra tenor, tessitura of a soprano), when his mother, Thetis, decides to send him to the island of Skyros. This was to avoid the brave and impulsive youth taking part in the Trojan War, where, according to the oracle, he would perish.

With the complicity and under the vigilance of the aging **Nearco** (tenor), along with the incautious help of King Lycomedes (**Licomedede**, bass), Achilles hides among the King's daughters, disguised as a girl with the name of **Pirra**. This gives him the opportunity to discover and enjoy – incognito – the charms and pleasures of young women. Behind this erotic game and chameleonic transvestism is his secret amorous relationship with **Deidamia** (soprano), daughter of Licomedes, destined to wed the young **Teagene** (soprano), who, in turn, is in love with Pyrrha / Achilles.

Amid these hilarious imbroglios, where sexual ambiguity is accentuated by the singers' tessituras and gender transpositions, the powerful Ulysses (**Ulisse**, contratenor, tessitura of a mezzosoprano) arrives on the island. He has been informed of the situation and decides to reclaim Achilles to lead the Greek army. Well aware of his untimely impulses and fighting spirit, Ulysses uses all the necessary subterfuge to seduce the boy: he gives an eloquent speech which calls upon the heroic defence of Greece, offers gifts to the King's daughters while hiding a sword for Achilles, and simulates a false attack on the island which is what finally awakens the spirit of the future hero.

At this point, the opera takes on its epic nature of *opera seria*. Achilles leaves behind his youthful ardour and there is a debate - until the end of the opera – of the grand ethical questions which underlie the myth:

- A short life of glory or a long life without it?
- Blissful love or battle for an ideal?
- Immortality in Elysium or heroic death as a man?

### **The new production of the Teatro Real**

The stage director **Mariame Clément** digs into these and other questions in her original dramaturgy by staging *Achilles in Skyros* in the presence of the historical Infanta María Teresa Rafaela. In this “éducation sentimentale”, the characters and the subsequent scenes of the opera are a motive for reflection about the emotions, pleasures, ideals, obligations, doubts, fears and attributes of men and women.

With the complicity of set and costume designer **Julia Hansen**, with whom she collaborates regularly, **Clément** situates the story of the opera in an “enchanted grotto” of rococo fragrance, which evokes the fanciful ruins created for 18<sup>th</sup> century gardens; or the curved and sensual shape of a woman's womb, that of a protective mother; or a rock on an imaginary island. This is where Achilles lives in disguise; he is young, playful and participates in the same circumstances as the other girls. However, he leaves the island as an adult, prepared to fight for his people, infused with masculine and heroic power, ready to abandon his beloved after the joyous wedding at the end of the opera. This marks the route of initiation and the birth of a hero; and a journey along the road of 18th century opera from the sexual freedom, abstraction and delights of the original Baroque period to the conventionalism of the genre which would prevail in the following centuries.

## **PARALLEL ACTIVITES**

**ALL CANCELLED**

**Every Tuesday during the month of March at 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. | Museo del Prado**

Visita guiada: Guided tours entitled, *Aprender a ser mortal. Aquiles en el Prado*. The Museo del Prado has prepared an itinerary through its galleries to discover the figure of the Greek hero.

**March 1, at 7 p.m. | Círculo de Bellas Artes, Sala de Columnas**

Concierto: A concert with the music of the 16th and 17th century for viola de gamba by Jordi Savall, orchestral conductor and ambassador for Early and Baroque music.

**March 10 and 11, 7 and 9 p.m. | Fundación SGAE, Sala Berlanga**

*Cine queer y trans*: With Achilles as a transvestite in the court of Skyros, the Fundación SGAE has programmed *Me llamo Violeta* and *La mujer fantástica*, two films which explore the subjects of *queer* and *trans* and address the problematics of a collective which makes no distinctions between sex or age.

**March 11, 6:30 p.m. | Museo del Prado, Auditorio**

Conferencia: The philosopher and French intellectual Javier Gomá, director of the Fundación Juan March, takes an in-depth look at the famous painting by Rubens, *Aquiles descubierto por Ulises y Diomedes*, (Achilles discovered by Ulysses and Diomedes), a description of the journey of life which he titles *Aquiles en gineceo, o aprender a ser mortal*.

**March 12 – April 12 (opening times of the library) | Biblioteca Nacional, Salón Italiano**

Exposición: Part of the collection of the National Library which has never been exhibited and is related to the opera *Achille in Sciro* that Corselli composed for the dynastic marriage between the crowns of Spain and France.

**March 13, 8:15 p.m. | Teatro Real, Sala Gayarre**

Enfoques: A conversation between Ivor Bolton, Mariame Clément, Álvaro Torrente and Grover Wilkins.

**March 18, 5 p.m. | Museo Arqueológico Nacional**

Visita guiada: Guided tour of the iconography of a selection of ceramics which illustrate the exploits of this emblematic Greek hero and the mythical causes of war, along with some of the adventures of other heroes and heroines who took part in this saga.

**March 18, 6:30 p.m. | Museo del Prado, Auditorio**

Conferencia: Álvaro Torrente, musicologist and director of the Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales (ICCMU), gives a talk that shares its title with the opera, *"Aquille in Sciro, una ópera no tan seria para una boda dinástica"*. He will discuss the music of Corselli and its legendary references.

**March 19, 8 p.m. | Institut Français de Madrid**

**Mesa redonda:** Roundtable discussion on history and music in the 18th century with particular reference to the work of Francesco Corbelli. With Nicolás Morales (Casa Velázquez), Álvaro Torrente (ICCMU) and María del Ser (RNE).

**March 25 at 8 p.m. | broadcast by EBU**

A recorded performance of the opera will be aired for member countries of the European Broadcasting Union ([EBU](#)), and on March 28 at 8 p.m. the opera will be broadcast throughout Spain by [Radio Clásica, de RNE](#).

**March 27 at 8 p.m. | broadcast live by ARTE TV**

*Achilles in Skyros* will be broadcast live by [ARTE TV](#) in an audiovisual coproduction between François Roussillon, Arte TV, Mezzo and RTVE. Subsequently it will be available in DVD and in the catalogue of [My Opera Player](#), the audiovisual platform of the Teatro Real.

**March 28 at 8 p.m. | broadcast by RADIO CLÁSICA, RNE**

The opera will be broadcast throughout Spain by [Radio Clásica, de RNE](#).

**March 29, 12:00 noon and 5 p.m. | Teatro Real, Sala Gayarre**

*¡Todos a la Gayarre!* Family workshops to discover music in an original and entertaining format with the *Swing Machine Orchestra*.

**April 2 at 8:30 p.m. | Museo Nacional de Escultura – Capilla del Colegio de San Gregorio (Valladolid)**

Recital: A musical soirée with soprano Laura Sabatel and harpist Miguel Ángel Sánchez Miranda who will perform a programme of 18th century Italian repertoire entitled *Música para el Buen Retiro*.

**Ciclo de conciertos | Fundación Juan March**

**Ciclo de conciertos:** 3 concerts which explore different musical genres associated with Corbelli's activity at the Spanish court where he was established a close connection with the courtiers. Soprano Alicia Amo, conductor Ivor Bolton, countertenor Tim Mead, the ensembles Música Boscareccia, Música Alchemica and the Orquesta Barroca de Sevilla will lead the three sessions.

**March 21, 12:00 noon:** [Cantatas](#).

**March 28, 12:00 noon:** [Aguiles en perspectiva](#).

**April 4, 12:00 noon:** [Las sonatas del rey](#).