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Castor et Pollux opera masterpiece

[GEOFF CHAPMAN](#)
MUSIC CRITIC

Now it can be told.

The naughty astronomers who named the constellation Gemini you might occasionally glimpse through our pollution-ruined atmosphere played fast and loose with the truth.

They weren't really twins at all, they were half-brothers as described in Greek mythology. And Castor's mom may have been putting a delicate spin on things when she fessed up about the kids, one of them mortal (Castor) but the other (Pollux) immortal, the fruit of her union with a swan (Jupiter in disguise, she claimed).

It's no surprise, then, that the story which unfolds in Sparta (and Hades) in the 18th-century opera *Castor et Pollux* by Jean-Philippe Rameau, his crowning musical achievement, has a more bizarre than usual plot.

Castor and Pollux both love T elaire. She and her sister Ph eb e, fianc ee of Pollux, both love Castor. At the end of the first (of five) acts, Castor is dead. But in Act 4, he's brought back from Hell by his father-in-law.

Thankfully, today's producers cram everything into two acts.

The tale was brought wonderfully to life by Opera In Concert this weekend. A CD will result on the Naxos label, but those who missed the live production certainly missed a treat.

With a chorus of 30, the 21-member Aradia Ensemble directed by Kevin Mallon and, above all, four principals in excellent voice on stage, the Jane Mallett Theatre throbbed with intensity amid remarkable displays of eloquence at yesterday's performance, the second of two.

Rameau's dramatic style mixes melodious airs with innovative and often sombre orchestral accompaniment. It clearly sprang from a fertile musical imagination and this was exploited splendidly by the cast. In an opera manner very much unlike its Italian counterpart — there are very few arias, so most of the singing is pure recitative, the chorus has to do a lot of work and the on-stage action is a dense mix of dialogue and declamation — their performance was full of engaging charm.

One aspect of French baroque work Opera In Concert could not replicate, given the venue and the organization's budget, was to have dancers. Instead, Aradia had lengthy opportunities to strut its stuff, but its contribution was the least effective — musicians sounded stiff when they weren't playing funeral music, the flow was laboured (though harpsichord and cellos were on side) and only rarely were they able to emulate the passions unleashed by the singers. The lengthy breaks for tuning were also annoying.

Ah yes, the voices. A new comet streaked into view at the weekend with the OIC debut of Montreal-based baritone Joshua Hopkins, currently doing a master's degree at McGill. As Pollux, he would seem to have every resource needed for success, with a thickly attractive vibrato and imposing ruggedness that are just part of his full-bodied, darkly coloured tonal armoury.

As Castor, tenor Colin Ainsworth understood how to wring every last drop of emphasis from his role, which is particularly important when this concert form is inhibiting to any kind of acting beyond hard stares (though a hug or two was managed). His warm voice found congenial employment in a text that goes out of its way to stress noble aims, with brotherly love and honourable actions taking the prime positions, and clearly is on an upward career path.

Sopranos Monica Whicher (T elaire) and Meredith Hall (Ph eb e, plus a few extra vampy moments as celestial tempstress) were well-matched, both with ringing tones and a full and vibrant delivery that operates throughout their vast ranges, as well as a clear understanding of the need for expressiveness to ornament basic recitative.

Their heady emoting made much of this richly harmonized music. Lesser roles were capably filled by bass Giles Tomkins as Jupiter and soprano Renée Winick as Cleone. As lyric opera, this production of *Castor et Pollux* was simply splendid. As soap opera it is full of potential for hundreds of new episodes. After all, you never learn what happens to the ladies when Castor and Pollux are made gods. And once you find out that the guys' sisters are Helen of Troy and the murderous Clytemnestra and that P and T have also been having a fling with yet another pair of brothers, this one could run and run!

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