

# Rebecca Franks – The Times 13.2.17

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★★★★☆

This opera didn't go down that well with its audiences in 1744. How tastes have changed. Garsington Opera is putting on Handel's opera-oratorio in the summer, while already here was a second chance this year to revel in the score's endless pleasure, only a fortnight after a concert version of *Semele* in Birmingham. This time we had the added amusement of on-stage antics, in a production by students and recent graduates of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, as part of Mid Wales Opera's spring tour.

And it was, bar the first act, a joyful affair. The director Martin Constantine makes modern-day sense of the mythological libretto, with smartphones and selfies. Semele belongs to the Church of Juno, a village-hall cult ruled by Cadmus (the authoritative Emyr Wyn Jones), who is forcing her to marry Athamus (Daniel Keating-Roberts). The scene is deftly set, but the escalation of fairly silly rites into a ritualistic attempted rape is jarring — and, strangely, seemingly forgotten by Semele.

Yet thereafter it is wittily handled. Semele and Jupiter embark on loved-up millennial hipster life; he owns a contemporary art gallery and woos her with neon-light installations and takeaway coffee. (Oh, the romance!) Her increasing narcissism plays into the vengeful Juno's hands, and the humour continues right to the end — all I'll say is that Apollo (Matthew Clark) delivers.

Although the vocal quality was sometimes uneven, from soloists and chorus, the cast — one of two — deserves full marks for its excellent diction. And there were names to watch. Ellen Williams (Semele) was at her assured, sweet-toned best in Act II, and Tom Smith (Jupiter) gave us an elegant *Where'er You Walk*. Dawn Burns (Ino) and Blaise Malaba (Somnus) made an impression, as did the designer Grace Venning. The Academy of Ancient Music-led orchestra and Nicholas Cleobury kept everything moving with grace and energy.

**Touring to March 4; [midwalesopera.co.uk](http://midwalesopera.co.uk)**