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Twenty-fourth Season

2008-2009

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AMERICAN CLASSICAL ORCHESTRA

Thomas Crawford, Music Director

Wednesday, May 6, 2009 8:00 p.m.
New York Society for Ethical Culture
2 West 64th Street, New York City

Zémire et Azor

OPERA IN FOUR ACTS

BY

ANDRÉ ERNEST MODESTE GRÉTRY

1741-1813



Sander – John Kawa Ali– Alex Guerrero

Zémire – Molly Davey

Fatmé – Amelia Feuer Lisbé – Holland Kerker

Azor – Matthew Peña

Cynthia Edwards, Stage Director

There will be one fifteen minute intermission

Ellen Stockbridge – mask design and production

ZÉMIRE ET AZOR SYNOPSIS

ACT I

The overture ends by painting a picture of a violent storm. Shipwrecked and lost, Sander, a Persian merchant, and his servant, Ali find themselves caught in the storm and take shelter in a deserted palace. It is night. Ali, frightened tries to convince his master to leave, but is persuaded to stay when a table laden with food and wine magically appears. After becoming very inebriated, Ali finds his courage to remain, even though the storm has abated and Sander now wants to leave. Before they depart, Sander plucks a rose from a nearby bush. It is the only promise he can fulfill to his daughters who requested different gifts upon his return. His youngest and favorite daughter asked only for a rose. Upon plucking it, however, an angry Azor appears. He is a Persian prince who has a beast-like face as the result of a spell cast by a vengeful fairy. Azor is furious that Sander insulted his hospitality with the theft and threatens to kill him. Sander begs to be allowed to see his children one more time. Azor proposes to spare Sander's life if Sander delivers one of his daughters in exchange. He threatens Sander that he will find him should Sander not follow through with his promise. Azor then sends Sander and Ali home on a cloud pulled by winged dragons.

ACT II

Zémire and her sisters, at home in Ormuz, are trying to stay awake all night awaiting Sander's return. They dream of the gifts he will bring. When Sander does return, it is with a heavy heart. He announces the news of his shipwreck and the family's financial ruin. Zémire senses that her father is hiding other more serious news. Once alone, Sander writes a farewell letter to his children. Meanwhile, Zémire has convinced Ali, who cannot resist a woman's tears, to tell her the truth. Upon hearing it, Zémire resolves to give up her own life in order to save her father. She convinces Ali to lead her back to Azor's palace.

ACT III

The act opens with Azor explaining the reason for the spell that has condemned him to have a hideous countenance until he can inspire true love. Following his aria "Ah! quel tourment" he leaves. Zémire and Ali appear, and Ali looks for his escape route. Azor reenters causing Zémire to faint upon seeing him. He is gentle with her and reassures her that he has no plans for her demise. Rather, he wants to make her queen of his realm. She realizes that his character is noble despite his appearance. She tells him that she misses her family, however, and sings "La Fauvette avec ses petits" to convince him see them. He allows it, but she may only watch them grieve for her through a magic tableau—if she approaches the tableau, they will vanish. Azor declares his love for Zémire, and finally agrees that she may return to her family, giving her a magic ring, which will release her from his power. He tells her that if she does not return by sunset, however, he will die from grief.

ACT IV

Ali is once again frightened ("J'en suis encore tremblant") when he sees the cloud pulled by winged dragons transporting Zémire home. Despite a joyful reunion, her efforts to convince her family of Azor's gentle and noble spirit are in vain. They oppose her in a powerful quartet, at the end of which, she jettisons the magic ring and vanishes once again. In a grotto on his palace grounds, Azor, thinking that Zémire has abandoned him, is in the depths of abject despair. In a lengthy solo, Zémire is heard calling to him (with echoing horn calls) from offstage. She ultimately declares her love for him, and the spell is broken. The scene is transformed into another extravagant palace. The Fairy restores Azor's natural beauty and presides over the couple's wedding. Azor also fulfills his promise to provide for his bride's family, and happiness is restored.

ZÉMIRE ET AZOR PROGRAM NOTES

BY GAIL MILLER ARMONDINO, PH.D.

Tonight's performance of *Zémire et Azor* is a testament to the work's longevity. When Grétry's opera had its premiere on November 9, 1771 (Fontainebleau) and again on December 16, 1771 (Comédie-Italienne) it was an unprecedented success for the composer. Not only was the music of a high quality, but the visual elements also created a stunning stage effect. Solid performances on the part of the singers contributed to the work's popularity. In fact, *Zémire et Azor* was so popular with French audiences that it was adapted and translated several times for performances abroad, including England—both at Drury Lane and at the Haymarket theatres, Vienna, and Italy. There may even have been a chamber performance of some highlights given at Fraunces Tavern by a Monsignor St. Aivre in New York City in 1790, in Philadelphia in 1793, and in Charleston, South Carolina at West and Bignall's theatre, both in 1794 and 1795. More recently, partly in connection with the 250th celebration of Mozart's birth—Mozart owned a copy of the score—*Zémire et Azor* has experienced a modern revival, including a recent performance by Opera Theatre of St. Louis.

The story that is behind Marmontel's brilliantly constructed libretto was already familiar to French audiences. The opera is based on three widely read sources that were popular in France at the time. The first, Nivelle de la Chaussée's play *Amour pour amour* (1742) gives the setting and the names of the title characters. Harem operas, those set in the Middle East, were all the rage during this period, so using a Persian setting all but ensured some amount of success. The other two sources that Marmontel used are two versions of the popular fairy-tale, *La Belle et la Bête*. The first, Mme Le Prince de Beaumont's 1756 rendering of the story appeared in her *Magasin des enfans*, a journal designed to instruct "young ladies of quality" in morality and matters of intellect. It is this version of the tale that forms the basis for most subsequent retellings, including the popular Disney movie. Gabrielle de Villeneuve's *La Belle et la Bête* from 1740, is not as well-known to modern readers, but, in fact, much of Marmontel's libretto reflects Villeneuve's version of the story more than it does Beaumont's. It is Villeneuve's story that provides the palace full of amusements for Belle that Marmontel included in *Zémire et Azor*, likely because of its dramatic potential. All three tales, however, are riddled with possibilities for special effects, and Marmontel exploited their potential in his libretto.

Morality and virtue form the main themes in *Zémire et Azor*. This work is a didactic comedy—not a farce. The moral overtones appealed to the French bourgeoisie of the period, "which came to see itself increasingly as the most worthy of social classes . . . because of its virtue, thrift, energy, and indeed patriotism." (David Charlton, *Grétry and the Growth of the Opéra-Comique*, 107). *Zémire*, herself, is the model of virtue throughout the work. That does not mean, however, that she is docile or weak. Just the opposite is true. She is outspoken, both with Azor and with her father. Her virtue lies in her strength of character and profound moral compass. Her resolve is tacitly tested throughout the opera, and in every case, she passes with flying colors. Moreover, in this early rescue opera (a highly popular genre in the late-eighteenth century), it is she who is the rescuer. She accomplishes her mission by disobeying her father because she knows it is the right thing to do.

Azor's virtue, while no less important, is different. His character perfectly fits the idea of the noble savage, popular in French literature well into the nineteenth century. Both Rousseau and Chateaubriand discuss this type of character in their writings. The noble savage literature emerged following the discovery of the New World, as the American Indian captured the imaginations of explorers and authors alike. Azor is by no means a Native American, but he resembles the literary version in both his dress and manner. Marmontel explicitly focuses on Azor's nobility and ferocity in his descriptions of the character. More important than his physical description, however, are Azor's actions. Unlike Zémire, he knows his virtue is being tested. This knowledge shapes his actions. His tendency toward violence (e.g., threatening Sander with death), notwithstanding, he needs to keep those sentiments in check and let his virtuous side shine if he wants the fairy's spell broken. Ultimately, his virtuous side prevails, enabling the happy ending.

Given the serious and virtuous natures of the title character, this opera would be a bit too moralistic for French audiences were it not for the comic antics of Sander's servant Ali. As most comic opera characters, Ali's actions are heavily based on the *lazzi* (stock comic bits) from the *commedia dell'arte*. Scenes of gluttony, such as the feast provided by Azor, scenes of fear, and scenes of a disobedient servant are all part of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, and French audiences would have been familiar with them. Long lists and songs with rapidly repeated text were also part of those conventions. Marmontel's brilliant incorporation of these familiar *lazzi* provided, through Ali, the perfect comic relief to an otherwise serious story.

Like Marmontel's libretto, Grétry's music, which is very Italianate in style, shows a high level of sophistication in the development of early comic opera. His predecessors explored some of the compositional techniques Grétry used, and later composers, such as Mozart, would refine them and, ultimately be credited with them. As stated earlier, Mozart owned a copy of *Zémire et Azor*, and one can see the influences on the later composer's work. Grétry's ensemble writing in particular shows character and plot development that is not truly seen again until the famous Act II Ensemble Finale of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*. The first duet between Ali and Sander does not simply comment on the action, but it moves the plot along. The pastoral introduction tells the audience that the raging storm of the first scene has indeed subsided, while the quick, ascending modulations (key changes) throughout the duet heightens the intensity of their argument and Sander's frustration with his servant.

One of the other brilliant ensembles in the opera is the charming trio that introduces Zémire and her sisters in the opening of Act II. Although it seems to be a quiet, light number, this trio beautifully depicts the sisters' personalities, especially in the middle section. In both the opening and *da capo* (repeat of the beginning), the sisters lovingly share the melodic lines, passing it from one to the other, much the way a string ensemble shares musical material. In the middle section, however, as the sisters talk about the gifts their father will bring them, Grétry works sibling rivalry into their music as the lines overlap, interrupting one another. We also see how Zémire stands apart from her sisters when she sings about the rose she requested. Like her sisters, she interrupts their argument over which gift is better, ribbons or lace, but then she extols the virtues of a simple rose making the other two seem greedy. At this point they join musical forces, echoing each other's music.

In the tableau scene in Act III, the audience sees a glimpse of Sander's profound grief over the loss of his daughter. They all see a hint of jealousy from Zémire's sisters—jealousy that is evident in the original fairy tale. More important, however, is the musical picture that Grétry paints. Zémire sees her family through a painting, and the music reflects the static nature of a formal portrait. It is in a slow, stately triple meter that never varies. Rarely during the course of the number does the orchestral accompaniment even stray from quarter notes as the primary rhythmic value.

Grétry's superb writing is further reflected in the arias, where he continues to define the characters through their music. Most notable are the arias for Zémire and Ali. Traditionally the music at the Opéra-Comique was lighter than that at the Tragédie-Lyrique (Opéra), and Zémire's first aria, "Rose Chérie," is no exception. However, as an *opera seria* (serious Italian opera) character type, she also must have more demanding music, as in the "Air de la fauvette." This aria, one of the work's highlights, is replete with long melismas (more than one note per syllable) and improvised vocal ornament, an operatic must during this period. One of the more charming features of this aria is her duet with the flute as the two imitate birdcalls. Her final aria, "Azor, en vain ma voix," is the most complex of her three solo numbers, in terms of its structure, subtly reflecting her character's growth.

Like Zémire, Azor's arias also demonstrate his growth through the course of the opera. His is a more challenging journey, and he maintains much of his menacing nature throughout, but glimpses of his gentle side are seen early on in "Ne va pas ma tromper." His ultimate transformation, though, begins in the opening of Act III. Here, Grétry uses unusual modulations to express Azor's torment. Azor's final aria, the only one preceded by sung recitative instead of spoken dialogue, completes his transformation in an aria with dramatically changing tempos and very specific keys to express his emotional shift.

Ali's music contrasts sharply with both title characters. His four arias, more than any other principal character, are very much in the *opera buffa* (comic Italian opera) style. Like many of his comic bits, his music is reminiscent of the *commedia dell'arte*. He uses repeated phrases, some malaprops, and rapid utterances on one syllable. Most of Ali's arias deal directly with his exaggerated fears of the extraordinary—chiefly supernatural—happenings. He is the first character to sing, and while a storm clearly rages on, as is depicted in the orchestral accompaniment to "L'Orage va cesser," he urges Sander to leave the enchanted palace. Because fear guides much of Ali's character, his second number, "Les Esprits don't on nous fait peur," provides a humorous contrast as he gains his courage through wine. The orchestra highlights his drunkenness by maintaining a triple meter through much of the aria against Ali's vocal line in a duple meter. Even with the antics of Ali's early arias, Grétry's brilliance in comic writing shines in the character's final aria, "J'en suis encore tremblant." He uses word painting to illustrate Ali's panic over seeing the flying dragons again through rapidly ascending and descending scalar passages as well as rapidly repeated syllables.

Even though *Zémire et Azor* has since fallen out of the standard repertoire, its mark upon the operatic stage has not been erased. Grétry and Marmontel created a comedy for the French stage that would become popular later in Italian *opera buffa*. They combined true comedy, not a popular genre in eighteenth-century Paris, with the virtue and *sensibilité* of the *comédie larmoyante* (semi-serious work with a happy outcome), all the while placing it in an enchanting setting riddled with special effects.

THOMAS CRAWFORD, MUSIC DIRECTOR

Music Director and Founder Thomas Crawford is active in numerous musical disciplines as conductor, composer, and organist. As a conductor, Mr. Crawford is a champion of both historically accurate performance styles of the Baroque and Classical repertoire and of new American music. He has distinguished himself as a composer in many idioms and has been especially prolific in vocal music.

Mr. Crawford founded the Fairfield Orchestra in 1980. In 1985 he also started the Orchestra of the Old Fairfield Academy. In 1998, after achieving success in performances and professional recordings with both orchestras, Mr. Crawford changed the name of his ensembles to American Classical Orchestra in order to focus exclusively on period instruments.

Mr. Crawford's orchestral training comes from Samuel Adler of the Eastman School of Music and from Hugo Fiorato, Conductor of the New York City Ballet Orchestra. He holds a Master of Arts degree in composition from Columbia University and a Bachelor of Music degree in composition and organ performance from the Eastman School of Music. Mr. Crawford has held church and choral directing positions in Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. He has served as Director of the Westchester Boys Choir and has guest conducted numerous oratorio choirs throughout the region. His choral training comes from Westminster Choir College in Princeton. He is Organist-Choirmaster at St Paul's in the Bronx.

Mr. Crawford has led his orchestras in Carnegie Hall, on the Lincoln Center Great Performers Series and at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. He has attracted many outstanding artists, including Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma, André Watts and Richard Goode. Mr. Crawford is also responsible for the Orchestra's numerous international recordings with such great artists as Malcolm Bilson and Keith Jarrett.



MOLLY DAVEY, SOPRANO

Described by The New York Times as a singer with “brilliant technique and otherworldly shimmer,” Molly Davey is a 2009 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions District Winner. Ms. Davey recently completed a recording of Lee Hoiby's *The Tempest* in the role of Ariel, for Albany Records. Past operatic performances include the roles of Gretel/Dew Fairy in *Hansel und Gretel*, Madame Goldentrill/Miss Silverpeal in *The Impresario*, Mabel in *The Pirates of Penzance*, Adele in *Die Fledermaus*, Frasquita in *Carmen*, Lauretta in *Gianni Schicchi*, and Polixena in *Trojan Women*.

Molly Davey currently resides in New York City and holds a Master's of Music Degree in Opera Performance from SUNY Purchase Conservatory and a Bachelor's of Music degree in Music Education from Susquehanna University.



MATTHEW PEÑA, TENOR

Matthew Peña has performed mainstage roles with Virginia Opera, Chautauqua Opera, Des Moines Metro Opera, Opera Santa Barbara, and the Instituto Superior de Arte del Teatro Colón. His operatic repertoire includes Nemorino in *Elisir d'Amore*, Almaviva in *Barbiere di Siviglia*, Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*, Ferrando in *Così fan Tutte* and Fenton in *Falstaff*. He has also appeared in concert with companies across the county, including Cleveland Singers Club, the San Jose Music Club as well as the Marilyn Horne Foundation's The Song Continues Festival at Carnegie Hall.



Matthew has won several awards and competitions including the Charles A Lyman Vocal Competition, the Anne Coxe Zagoreos Award, Kosciusko Foundation Maria Sembrich Competition, the Bloomberg Greenwood Prize, and the Opera Columbus Irma M. Cooper Competition. He is a graduate of Oberlin College and Conservatory and the Manhattan School of Music, where he recorded principal roles in Lee Hoiby's *A Month in the Country* and Spohr's *Zemire und Azor*, both commercially released through Albany Records.

Upcoming engagements include the appearance as the tenor soloist in *Missa Solemnis* with The Choral Society and a participant in the Steans Institute at the Ravinia Festival.

HOLLAND KERKER, SOPRANO

Soprano Holland Kerker is currently in the second year of her Masters degree at SUNY Purchase, under Jacque Trussel. A Los Angeles native, she received her Bachelor of Arts at Pepperdine University in Malibu where she graduated with honors and was inducted into the Phi Kappa Lambda National Music Honor Society. Recent performances include Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*, Mother in *Amahl & the Night Visitors*, and Abigail Williams in Robert Ward's *The Crucible*. This April at Purchase, Miss Kerker will perform Zita in *Gianni Schicchi*, and The Princess in the world premiere of *Confession*, a new opera composed at SUNY Purchase as a prequel to Puccini's *Suor Angelica*. Other past roles include Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro*, Despina in *Così fan tutte*, and a breadth of Gilbert & Sullivan including Mabel in *The Pirates of Penzance*, Josephine in *H.M.S. Pinafore* and Yum-Yum in *The Mikado*. In addition, Miss Kerker has performed overseas, with concert experience in Prague, Salzburg, and Germany.



ALEX GUERRERO, TENOR

This concert of *Zemire et Azor* marks Alex Guerrero's (Ali) debut with the American Classical Orchestra. As opera and oratorio soloist, his work has ranged from performances of time-honored Baroque classics, including a performance last December of Handel's *Messiah* with Monmouth Civic Chorus and Orchestra led by Mark Shapiro in Red Bank, NJ, but also world premieres, including the 2005 New York premiere of Jorge Sosa's one-act comic Mexican opera, *Loveless*. He has been featured on the Marble Collegiate Church Choirs' latest CD release *Songs of Simple Faith*, covered the role of "Senator" in New York City Opera's January production of Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Next month he will perform Haydn's *The Creation* in New Rochelle, NY. As part of the Mannes Opera, he sang the role of "Tinca" in their production of Puccini's *Il Tabarro* (from *Il Trittico*), coached by resident artist Regina Resnik.

Alex has also been active with the NY metropolitan area's premiere ensembles: The New York Virtuoso Singers, Voices of Ascension, Musica Sacra, the Marble Collegiate Church Sanctuary Choir, Trinity Wall Street Church Choir (including *Contemporary A Capella Scandinavian Choral Works and Martin Mass for Double Choir*, their latest soon-to-be released CD), the Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue choir, the Gregg Smith Singers (including their *I Am in Need of Music* and *The Young Ives CD* releases), and with the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola Choir (including their recently released *Ginastera Lamentations of Jeremiah and Schnittke Concerto for Choir CD*).

He earned his Bachelor of Music and Master of Music degrees in Vocal Performance from Mannes College, where he also studied music theory pedagogy and composition.



AMELIA FEUER, SOPRANO

Soprano Amelia Feuer is an active performer comfortable on both the operatic and musical theater stages. Her roles have included Mother in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, Fiona in *Brigadoon*, Lady Larken in *Once Upon A Mattress*, Liesel in *The Sound of Music*, and June in *Over Here*. In 2009, Ms. Feuer will be performing Ciesaca in *Gianni Schicchi*, with the Purchase Conservatory. She has also participated in Bard College's Summerscape Festival, in a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Sorcerer*. Ms. Feuer is currently a student of the SUNY Purchase Conservatory, where she studies opera performance and is an active member of the school choir. She has studied at Universitaire de la Sorbonne in Paris, France, where she resided from January – June of 2008.



JOHN KAWA, TENOR

Principal tenor soloist John Kawa was praised for having “plenty of stamina as well as [being] a well-rounded tenor” and he “fully conveyed the sense of his character,” by W.T. Walker of the *Classical Voice of North Carolina* for his title role performance of Mozart’s *Idomeneo* at the A.J. Fletcher Opera Institute. In addition to *Idomeneo*, John has sung Orpheus in Offenbach’s *Orpheus in the Underworld*, Valère in Mechem’s *Tartuffe*, Frantz in Offenbach’s *Les Contes d’Hoffmann*, Il Giudice in Verdi’s *Un Ballo in Maschera*, and Eutropio in Donizetti’s *Belisario*. He also had the joy of working under Kirke Mechem directly in a staged workshop of his most recent opera, *Pride and Prejudice*. His solo concert repertoire includes Haydn’s *Lord Nelson Mass*, Joby Talbot’s *Path of Miracles*, Saint-Saens’ *Christmas Oratorio*, Stravinski’s *Les Noces*, Handel’s *Messiah*, Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* and multiple Bach cantatas and oratorios. This season marks his second year with the Bach Choir at Holy Trinity Lutheran and third year in New York as a soloist and choral artist singing with such groups as the New York Virtuoso Singers, St. Andrew Chorale, Russian Chamber Chorus of New York, New York City Ballet, American Symphony Orchestra, and various others. Previously, he has performed at the Magnolia Baroque Festival in Winston-Salem, NC, the *Illuminations!* Summer Festival in Manteo, NC, and with the Macon Symphony Orchestra, in central Georgia. Singing engagements have taken him as far as South Africa and to several European nations. Mr. Kawa holds a BM in vocal performance from Mercer University in Macon, GA and a MM in opera performance from the North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem, NC.



CYNTHIA EDWARDS, STAGE DIRECTOR

Cynthia Edwards has staged new productions of *Trovatore* for Florida Grand Opera, *Tosca* for Opera Delaware, *Carmen* for Baltimore Opera and Anchorage Opera, *Die Zauberflöte* for Stageworks in Washington, DC and six productions for Harrisburg Opera, most recently *Pagliacci*. A concert staging of *La Serva Padrona*, starring baritone Sanford Sylvan, marked her debut with the Carmel Bach Festival. She will return to Anchorage next season for *Eugene Onegin*.

A stage director with New York City Opera since 1988, Ms. Edwards has mounted revivals of Jonathan Eaton’s production of *Carmen*, Frank Corsaro’s *Tosca*, *Die Tote Stadt* and Ravel double bill, Tito Capobianco’s *Mefistofele* and *Rigoletto*, and Theodore Pappas’ *Merry Widow* and has traveled with the company to Saratoga, Costa Mesa, Wolf Trap and Artpark.

Ms. Edwards also served as Associate Director for the 2007 production of Vanessa with Michael Kahn and as Assistant Director and liaison for the “Live from Lincoln Center” telecast of Jonathan Eaton’s *Cavalleria Rusticana/Pagliacci*.



AMERICAN CLASSICAL ORCHESTRA

The American Classical Orchestra celebrates classical music performance on authentic instruments, specializing in repertoire from the 17th to 19th centuries. Founded by music director Thomas Crawford in 1985 as the Orchestra of the Old Fairfield Academy, the Orchestra works to render more faithfully music of the Baroque, Classical, and early Romantic eras. In 1999, the orchestra's name was changed to American Classical Orchestra. Interested in reviving and preserving the art of playing period instruments, the American Classical Orchestra also fosters the education of musicians and the public in authentic performance technique.

Comprised of leading period instrumentalists in the New York metropolitan region, the Orchestra has achieved significant critical acclaim through its performances and its professional recordings in New York City and Connecticut. The ACO has recorded the complete Mozart wind concerti, using its principal players as soloists. These three compact discs mark the first comprehensive survey of the Mozart wind concerti by an American period-instrument ensemble and conductor.

The American Classical Orchestra has appeared in the Lincoln Center Great Performers Series. In December 2000 the Orchestra made its debut at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in a program specially designed for the exhibition "Art and the Empire City: New York, 1825-1861."

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